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

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12 November 2018
House of Commons

Monday 12 November 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—

West Anglia College

1. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): What discussions he has had with West Anglia College on his Department’s document “Investigation Report: the College of West Anglia”, published in August 2018. [907536]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The Education and Skills Funding Agency has been clear that West Anglia College cannot undertake any further subcontracting until the ESFA is satisfied that all the proper procedures highlighted in the report are in place. Frequent dialogue with the college continues, and I will keep the hon. Gentleman informed. I praise him for his tenacity in highlighting this issue.

John Mann: West Anglia College is avoiding me. Some £160,000-worth of taxpayers’ money, yet not a single student—all from my constituency—is fulfilling and passing the course. The college did not even know that the course was taking place 50 miles away from where it thought it was taking place. Is it not incumbent on the college now to attend a meeting and to pay back the money that has been lost by some of my constituents, in terms of facilities and expenses, because of the shambles delivered by West Anglia College?

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman’s term “shambles” is not inappropriate. This has been a shocking case, and it is from such cases that we learn lessons to make sure that it does not happen again. He talks about paying the money back, and I am sure the ESFA is looking at all possible options to make sure that his constituents are well served.

Mr Speaker: I have a feeling the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) might seek an Adjournment debate on the matter. Who knows, he might be successful.

Apprenticeships

2. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships.

11. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships.

22. Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): Apprenticeships are now of high quality, with more off-the-job training and holistic end-point assessment. This ensures that, at the completion of an apprenticeship, the apprentice can demonstrate that they have the skills, knowledge and behaviours for their existing employer or a new employer in the future. Forty-four apprenticeships are now at the new higher-quality standard, and training is up from 540 hours to 670 hours, which is a 20% increase—well ahead of where we thought we would be on quality.1

Kevin Hollinrake: Derwent Training Association in Malton in my constituency offers very high-quality precision engineering apprenticeships, but too often it comes up against headteachers who would rather see

1.[Official Report, 19 November 2018, Vol. 649, c. 6MC.]
their students go to university. What more can we do to make sure that schools promote high-quality apprenticeships?

Anne Milton: We have a lot more to do; there is no doubt about it. Wherever I go, I often hear from student apprentices who say that they had very little support from their school. Since January 2018 schools are required to allow technical education and apprenticeship training providers to come in to talk to pupils, and our apprenticeship support and knowledge project provides schools with resources to help them promote apprenticeships. The apprenticeship ambassador network also visits schools so that pupils can hear at first hand about the fantastic opportunities that an apprenticeship can bring.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachel Maclean. [Interruption.] Beetle in, beetle in. It is very good of the hon. Lady to drop in on us. I hope she was advised of the grouping by the Government—I am sure she was. I hope she is now ready, as I have given her a bit of injury time.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for her response—[Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: I am doing my best to help the hon. Lady. While I am burbling on, she has an opportunity to prepare her question, which I feel sure is now fermenting satisfactorily in her mind.

Rachel Maclean: What steps is the Department taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships?

Anne Milton: I do not want to fluster my hon. Friend. The Department is doing a great deal to improve apprenticeships. It is important to make sure that apprenticeships offer high-quality education that rivals that of our universities, so we are doing exactly that. There is no doubt that apprenticeships are already offering such education. We have a £10 million development fund available to develop degrees at a high level, and apprenticeship starts at high levels continue to grow—up almost 30% on last year.

Damian Green: Many large firms in my constituency, notably Premier Foods, have great apprenticeship schemes and are using the new system very creatively to improve the quality of those apprenticeships, but it is often more difficult for small companies to do the same. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that small businesses can benefit from apprenticeships as much as large businesses do?

Anne Milton: I congratulate Premier Foods on what it is doing in my right hon. Friend’s constituency. Levy payers can already transfer up to 10% of their funds to other employers, including SMEs, and we are increasing that to 25% from next year. SMEs have taken longer to put in place their apprenticeship programmes, although many have already grabbed the opportunity.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I apologise to the Minister for not being able to welcome her on her visit to Huddersfield and to Kirklees College? It was a very good visit and was well received, but did she talk to the principal about what is happening up and down the country, where so many people want to get on quality apprenticeships but cannot get the GCSE in English or in maths? Surely there should be a practical maths and practical English so that these kids can get the education they deserve.

Anne Milton: I had a wonderful visit to Kirklees College and I was impressed with all I saw there. It is important that young people have a grounding in English and maths. I know this is difficult for some young people, and we are doing a great deal to improve the teaching of maths. Where people have failed after all those years in school, we cannot just go on doing the same thing. We have the opportunity to offer functional skills, which offers those young people an alternative way of getting a good qualification in maths.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): A very successful Queen’s award-winning company in my constituency provides examinations and training standards throughout the world in contemporary music, but it cannot provide these apprenticeship standards in the UK because of the Government’s rigidity in not allowing them or providing them in industries with a lot of freelance workers. Can the Minister address that problem?

Anne Milton: Yes, I can. The right hon. Gentleman perhaps ought to know that I have continued contact with my fellow Ministers in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, because this issue is important. We are not being rigid. There are ways around this, and I had a recent meeting to discuss exactly this point. It is important for the industry to get together and talk to the Institute for Apprenticeships, because there are ways around this.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): How can we improve the quality of apprenticeships when further education—or certainly Coventry College—has had a 30% cut? What is the Minister going to do about it?

Anne Milton: By 2020, there will be £2.5 billion available for apprenticeships. In fact, a lot of apprenticeship training is done by independent training providers, so I urge all further education colleges to make sure they get involved and take up the opportunity that the levy money makes available.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Surprisingly, my question is a segue to that asked by my old boss, the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). Apprenticeships are a great success story for this Government, although they are being terribly undermined by the clunking fist that is the apprenticeship levy. Will the Minister look specifically at the position in the film industry, where apprenticeships do not last the standard length of time? When people are apprentices on a film production, it might last only three months. There needs to be some flexibility in order to support apprenticeships in our award-winning creative industries.

Anne Milton: Although I often agree with my right hon. Friend, I disagree entirely with his description of the apprenticeship levy as a clunking fist. It is what has driven all the improvements and is part of the reason we have the £2.5 billion available. I am very aware of the
issues in the film industry. I have had several meetings with people from the industry and we are working with it to make sure that where people are working on a contract, or are not on a permanent contract, apprenticeships may be available.

Social Mobility

3. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility. [907539]

10. Adam Afriye (Windsor) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility. [907546]

20. Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility. [907556]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Social mobility is a top priority right across the Department, from the early years at school to supporting disadvantaged students into university and improving technical education.

Maggie Throup: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. However, as the party of aspiration, what more are our Government doing to help our young people achieve their dreams? Specifically, what are we doing through the secondary school system, which is formative in developing their future roles?

Damian Hinds: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Of course, the attainment gap has narrowed by 10% at secondary school, but she is right to say that we need constantly to be thinking about aspiration, which is why our careers strategy and the work of the Careers & Enterprise Company are so important.

Mr Speaker: I call Adam Afriye.

Adam Afriye: No. 10, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, no.

Adam Afriye: Grouped—I understand, Mr Speaker. I was slightly wrong-footed, as ever.

Irrespective of political persuasion or ideology, everyone in this House will agree that the state has a special responsibility towards vulnerable children in care. Only 6% or 7% of them get to university, and 60% of them have behavioural and mental health challenges. We must congratulate the Royal National Children’s SpringBoard Foundation and Butele UK on their work in providing bursaries for university. Does the Minister agree that we must look to expand work in this area?

Damian Hinds: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that we need to expand work in that area, and I commend the charities that he mentioned, including for their work to inform local authorities about how to make placements in boarding schools. It is true that for the right child at the right time and at the right school, boarding can create a life-changing opportunity. Encouragement into university is also vital, of course.

Dr Offord: A recent OECD report stated that the children of poor families are likely to take five generations to start to earn an average income, compared with two generations for families in Denmark and three in Sweden. Why has it taken the United Kingdom so long to bridge this gap?

Damian Hinds: These are big topics and, indeed, stubborn statistics that take quite some time to move. As anybody who has compared the 1970 cohort with the 1958 cohort will attest, it is a problem that goes back through multiple Governments, but we need to keep working on it. The most recent OECD statistics show a more encouraging picture than there was previously thought to be. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: There is an enormous amount of rather noisy chuntering from a sedentary position, principally emanating from a senior statesman in the House—namely the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). His colleague the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) is trying to encourage him in good behaviour; I urge her to redouble her efforts, as she has some way to travel.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given the Government’s apparent commitment to social mobility, would it not be a good idea to introduce a social mobility impact assessment for all Government policies and budget plans? That way, we might avoid stories such as the one that appears today in *Nursery World*, which details how across the country 27 schemes targeted at the most disadvantaged children in the early years have had to be scrapped because of changes to the early years funding formula.

Damian Hinds: I apply social mobility considerations right across the work of the Department for Education, and I also work with Ministers across Government to make sure that we are doing the same in all that we do.

23. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the effect that the reintroduction of higher education student number controls would have on the number of young students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who make it to university?

Damian Hinds: We believe that any young person who has the potential to benefit from university should be able to do so, and the existing system helps to facilitate exactly that. More than £800 million is being spent on access encouragement from universities. We need to make sure that that is spent as well as it can be, to make sure that any young person from any background has an equal opportunity to benefit.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): A huge block to social mobility is the Government’s policy of forcing schools to pay the first £6,000 of costs to support children with special needs. Does the Secretary of State accept that that penalises schools for taking students with additional needs, incentivises doing the wrong thing, impoverishes those schools that do the right thing and, most of all, hurts children with special needs and their families? Will he agree fully to fund education healthcare plans?
Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right to look at things such as the incentives that are inherent in the system. Of course, schools have a notional special educational needs budget, which has got the first £6,000 is supposed to be linked to, but we keep all these matters under review right across the system—in mainstream schools and special schools.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) were listening to what the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) had to say, they will have observed that references to SEN are perfectly orderly in the context of this question. That is a hint; whether they take the hint is up to them, but the Speaker is trying to be helpful to Back Benchers, which is what I have spent nine and a half years doing.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): An independent review of higher education funding is under way. Does the Secretary of State agree that any proposals in that review that are regressive in nature, that would reintroduce a student number cap or that would act in effect as a brake on social mobility are not recommendations that this Government should accept?

Damian Hinds: It goes without saying that my right hon. Friend has very considerable expertise in this area and I take what she says extremely seriously. The review that she mentions is informed by an independent panel. That independent panel has not yet completed its work and the Government have not yet considered what recommendations may come forward, but, of course, social mobility must be at the heart.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Nursery schools play a crucial role in promoting social mobility, and that includes the outstanding Ellergreen and East Prescott Road nursery schools in my constituency. The Secretary of State will be aware that there is widespread concern about the long-term funding for nursery schools. Will he announce today that we will shortly hear about long-term sustainable funding for nursery schools?

Damian Hinds: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The funding for high needs has been going up, and will reach just under £6 billion. In Hertfordshire, it has risen by 4.3% this year. Our reforms from 2014 were the most significant reforms in this area for a generation, but obviously we need to continue to strive more.

16. [907552] Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Suffolk has been criticised for a particularly poor range of special educational needs and disability provision. Given the fragmentation of local education decision making in this country now, how would the Minister advise that that could be addressed?

Damian Hinds: I know that local authorities work with each other to share best practice and to look at what happens. A whole range of things needs to be considered from, of course, training provision for teachers in mainstream schools, to the availability of places in special schools and so on. I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman’s local authority will look at all those areas as well.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Hastings is one of the opportunity areas supported and funded by the Government, which will be the biggest driver of social mobility for those of us in it in a generation. Although we celebrate the success and work closely with the Department for Education to make sure that it delivers on those changes, such is the success that we are now concerned about the end of the opportunity area funding. May I urge the Secretary of State to think carefully about how that end might be smoothed so that areas such as Hastings, which will get such extraordinary change from the opportunity area, do not suddenly find themselves cut off?

Damian Hinds: I am thinking carefully about that. It was always the intention that it would be a three-year programme and that we would then take learnings from the opportunity areas both to continue that programme in those areas, and also to look at what could work elsewhere, and we will continue to look at that. May I commend my right hon. Friend for her personal leadership in the Hastings opportunity area, which I had the chance to visit recently?

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Successive Conservative Education Secretaries of State have rightly identified sixth-form colleges as engines of social mobility, yet the rate for 16-to-18 funding has not changed for many, many years under this and the predecessor Government. Is it not time to raise the rate?

Damian Hinds: It is. As someone who has a long passion for and personal professional experience in the sixth-form sector, the hon. Gentleman is right to identify that 16-to-18 funding is tight. That is, of course, something that we need to keep under review and have in mind as we come up to the spending review. There are, of course, things such as the maths premium. For some colleges, the T-levels funding will also be relevant.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that key to closing the social mobility gap is access to high-quality early years education for those who need it most. Therefore, he will be as concerned
as I was to see a report by PACEY—the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years—released today, finding a downward trend in qualification levels for childminders while the number of nursery workers in training is dropping too. His own Department’s figures show that only one in four families earning under £20,000 is accessing 30 hours of free childcare a week, which might be because the same report shows that more than half of private nurseries have put up their fees in the past 12 months. Can he tell us how less well-off families unable to access more expensive childcare with less qualified staff closes the social mobility gap?

Mr Speaker: That was so good that one would think the hon. Lady had experience of acting.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady is right to identify the centrality of the hundreds of thousands of dedicated people who work in nurseries and early years settings. She mentioned the 30-hours offer and the differences in different income groups. A lone parent has to earn just over £6,500 to be able to access the 30-hours offer. That is one of five extensions of early years and childcare support that have been made available by our Governments since 2010. Overall, by the end of the decade, we will be investing an extra £1 billion, rising to £6 billion in total, on early years in childhood.

Relationships and Sex Education

4. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What funding he plans to allocate to schools to enable them to provide relationships education and sex education lessons.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We have certainly given this a great deal of thought in the context of relationships and sex education. We believe that all schools should ensure that young people, whatever their developing sexuality or identity, feel that relationships education and RSE is relevant to them and sensitive to their needs. The purpose of the new provisions includes ensuring that young people learn that there are different types of relationships in modern Britain. Schools should therefore ensure that RSE is inclusive and meets the needs of all young people.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): As I am sure we are all aware from our experiences of this House, the issues that surround relationships and sex education at any age can be incredibly sensitive. My question is therefore about training. At this moment in time, how much training will the Government provide? Will the Minister ensure that every teacher who is going to teach this will be able to “get it”?

Nick Gibb: Of course, it is the responsibility of schools to provide the relevant training for their teachers in all curriculum subjects. We are looking at the response to the consultation—which, as I said, closed last week—to determine what support and resources schools will need to be able to deliver this far-reaching reform of the curriculum in our schools.

Tuition Fees: Social Mobility

5. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of tuition fees on levels of social mobility.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The proportion of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds entering full-time higher education is up from 13.6% in 2009 to 20.4% in 2017, so disadvantaged 18-year-olds were 50% more likely to enter HE than in 2009. That is a record that this Government can be proud of.

Drew Hendry: A recent study by Universities UK and the CBI showed that about 60% of respondents were put off applying for part-time study courses because of the cost of tuition fees. Does the Minister have any plans to reduce tuition fee costs, or, even better, will he follow the example of the Scottish Government in scrapping them altogether?

Mr Gyimah: The example of the Scottish Government is not one that is worth copying. We know that in Scotland, because tuition is free, resource per student is lower, and therefore disadvantaged students in Scotland have to wait for English students ahead of them in clearing because they pay more money. That is not an example we will be copying.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): At St Andrews University, Scottish students go free, and as a consequence their numbers are capped at 20% of the university’s population. Cut tuition fees, and we cut opportunities for students. Is that simple, isn’t it?
Mr Gyimah: My right hon. Friend is, as ever, absolutely right. In Scotland, the opportunity for disadvantaged students is capped, but that for international students is uncapped. That is not a record worth copying.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Given the importance of science, technology, engineering and maths subjects for the future of higher education and the economy and given the importance of social mobility in those subjects, will the Minister rule out, as a result of the Augar review, a future where STEM fees are higher than fees for arts and humanities courses, because that is apparently under consideration?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman is asking me to comment on leaks, and it will be no surprise to him that I will not comment on any leaks about an independent review. However, I will say that ensuring there is opportunity for everyone and creating opportunities that satisfy the skills our country needs is at the heart of the review. It is in the terms of reference, and that is what I will be looking for in the recommendations.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The latest report by the Education Committee suggests that some students are not getting value for money from their university courses. Does the Minister agree that only degrees that enhance employability and earning potential by more than the cost of the course can possibly improve social mobility, and what more can the Government do to make sure that young people make the right decisions about which course to go on?

Mr Gyimah: I take slight issue with the point my hon. Friend makes in the sense that there are degrees that do not lead to higher earnings but are of incredible value—for example, for people who go into social work or nursing—but we need to ensure that every degree is of the right quality and gives students the best opportunity. That is why the new regulator, the Office for Students, which has the interests of students at its heart, is looking at value for money for students, and it is why we have introduced the teaching and excellence framework to focus on the quality of teaching. We are also backing the launch of new information to empower students to make the right choices.

Higher Education: Overseas Collaboration

6. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions has he had with the Home Secretary on the effect of immigration law on the ability of higher education establishments to engage effectively in work with their counterparts overseas?

Mr Gyimah: I assume the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Horizon 2020 research programme. The UK has made it very clear that we want to fully associate with the successor programme to Horizon 2020—Horizon Europe—to ensure that our researchers can continue to collaborate with the brightest and the best in Europe.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Despite spending nearly £2,000 on visa fees, Dr Mohamed Alnor, a professor from the Sudan International University, was denied entry to the UK to attend a conference in Glasgow last month. This is becoming a common situation for academics from the middle east, Africa and India. What assurances can the Minister give our academic community that this issue will be addressed immediately?

Mr Gyimah: The Prime Minister made it clear in her Jodrell Bank speech earlier this year that we welcome all international researchers. In fact, at least 30% of the researchers in the UK are from abroad. On the new immigration system that is being considered, we will make sure that we facilitate the brightest and the best being able to come here, work here and collaborate with our researchers.

Carol Monaghan: But the Glasgow conference is not unique. In Liverpool last month, 10 delegates were refused entry, including one from India whose research has been sponsored by the UK Government. Professor McKee from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine has said:

“Academic collaboration is yet another consequence of the government’s ‘hostile environment’ policy, denying visas to those working on the ground to improve the health of some of the poorest people in the world”.

How will the Minister ensure that the UK continues to be open for international collaborations and conferences?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady is referring to a specific case, and I cannot comment in detail about it. Needless to say, we are open and welcoming. Just in July, the Government introduced the new tier 5 visa regime to allow academics to come here on short-term visas to collaborate with researchers here. We are genuinely open to sectoral research and sectoral collaboration. If there is a specific instance where someone was disappointed, I would be happy to look at it.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

7. Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of teacher recruitment and retention.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The number of teachers remains high, with more than 450,000 in schools across the country—that is over 10,000 more than in 2010. With a strong economy and the lowest unemployment for over 40 years, competition with other professions, industry and commerce for the best graduates is fierce. That is why we have generous tax-free bursaries of up to £26,000 in certain subjects to attract high-performing graduates into teacher training and into the profession.
Julie Elliott: I thank the Minister for that answer, but teachers are leaving the profession in droves. In the north-east, over 500 teachers left last year. In real terms, teachers are thousands of pounds worse off than in 2010. Why is the Minister still imposing a real-terms pay cut on the majority of teachers?

Nick Gibb: We agreed the School Teachers Review Body recommendations for a 3.5% rise in the pay ranges for the main scale of teachers, a 2% rise in the upper pay scale and a 1.5% rise for the leadership range. We are funding that to schools through a teachers’ pay grant over and above the 1% they will already have budgeted. Earlier this year, we announced the new recruitment and retention strategy, building on existing work to boost marketing and support to applicants. The strategy seeks to increase retention rates by streamlining accountability and stripping away unnecessary workload, which the evidence suggests does not improve children’s outcomes.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What action is my right hon. Friend taking to cut down the time teachers spend doing unnecessary data-driven tasks, to help recruitment and retention?

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: dealing with workload has been a key objective of this Government. In July, we published the workload reduction toolkit, which provides material, practical advice and case studies that headteachers and other staff can use to address workload issues in their schools.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Obviously, the pay award that will go to teachers will also go to teachers in sixth-form colleges, but the Government are not funding that pay rise, so what assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the teachers’ pay award on college budgets?

Nick Gibb: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, we acknowledge that funding in the 16-to-18 sector has not been protected in the same way that we have protected school funding since 2010, because since 2010 our priority has been to ensure that basic education between the ages of five and 16 is given the priority it needs.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Servicemen and women in Her Majesty’s armed forces represent the very best of British, so what progress is being made with the Troops to Teachers scheme to encourage veterans to become teaching professionals?

Nick Gibb: The Troops to Teachers scheme has resulted in a number of high-qualified ex-military coming into our schools. It has been slow to start, but it is a good programme, and I am determined that it will continue.

Further Education Funding

8. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Treasury on funding for further education.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): We are working closely with the Treasury, as finance has been challenging for further education colleges, and this work will continue in preparation for the spending review. We are also undertaking a look at the resilience of the sector to make sure that the regulatory structures and funding give us the high-quality provision that we want to see. I have mentioned the £2.5 billion that will be available by 2020 for apprenticeship training. When T-levels are fully rolled out in 2020, there will be an additional £500 million a year.

Scott Mann: I thank the Minister for that response. As we approach the spending review, may I emphasise, particularly from North Cornwall, the passion and drive that we need to make sure that this money does go into further education? In the post-Brexit world we will be living in, it is more important than ever that our young people have the skills to benefit, so can we make sure that we push the Treasury hard on this?

Anne Milton: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for those in his constituency. Education is crucial, and we need to help young people to acquire the skills to thrive in life and work. For many, further education offers a second, third or even fourth chance, so it is important that we make sure they have the resources they need. Sadly, further education often gets squashed between the discussion about schools and that about university. I know my hon. Friend will be making his own representations to the Treasury.

Karin Smyth: We have had an interesting half hour. We are being told that funding in this sector is tight and not protected. We have just been told that this is the second, third or fourth chance for people in this sector. Given that young people have to stay on until 18, what assessment has been made of the impact of the reduction in income to the further education sector on their outcomes under this Government?

Anne Milton: As the hon. Lady will have heard, we are looking at the resilience of the sector. I mentioned the £2.5 billion by 2020 and the £500 million for T-levels. There is a lot of work going on to ensure the sector has the resources it needs. Colleges are delivering extraordinarily high-quality training and education—three-quarters of colleges are good or outstanding—and they have high-quality financial management. We put a huge amount of money into restructuring, with exceptional financial support for this sector. A number of pots of money are now being made available to increase the number of teachers in further education.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Minister says she has been working very closely with the Treasury, but it seems as though they are close encounters of the failed kind. FE’s financial woes are now at crisis. She knows that the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that spending is down by £3.3 billion since 2011. She knows that a stream of departing principals highlight the problem: 37 colleges on notice to improve their financial health. Now, Ofsted’s chief inspector says funding cuts
are affecting FE’s sustainability. Before the Budget, the Minister urged everybody in FE to speak up for funding. They did with one voice through the brilliant Love our Colleges campaign, but the Chancellor ignored them. How is she going to address the crisis now that the Treasury has cold-shouldered FE?

Anne Milton: I will not attempt to compete with the hon. Gentleman’s jokes about close encounters. I do not agree that we have been given the cold shoulder. We are looking at the resilience of the sector. I made it quite clear that I am fully aware of the challenges that FE faces. We have been putting in a lot of money, but I know that in the longer term we have to ensure that the core funding allows FE to deliver the high quality education that young people and, indeed, older people need.

New Schools

9. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the number of new schools in (a) London and (b) England. [907545]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): As well as those already open, we have approved a further 266 free schools and university technical college applications, including 69 in London. What we now need to know from the Opposition is what would happen to the programme in the unfortunate event of their getting into government.

Greg Hands: My two boroughs have seen an astonishing five new secondary schools opened under this Government: the Kensington Aldridge Academy, the Chelsea Academy, the West London Free School, the Hammersmith Academy and the Fulham Boys School. The fifth one, however, needs to move to a new site as soon as possible. I thank my right hon. Friend for meeting me in the summer, when we talked about the new site. Will he give us an update on progress on moving to the new site?

Damian Hinds: First, let me thank my right hon. Friend for his personal involvement with these programmes. Of course we always endeavour to minimise the amount of time that any open free school needs to stay in temporary accommodation before moving to a permanent site. As he will know, there have been complexities in this case. I am very happy to meet him to discuss them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Rather than spending time, energy and money on new schools in London or in England, would it not make far more sense to spend more time, energy and money on Alaw Primary School, whose children are in the Public Gallery? In fact, they have just left.

Mr Speaker: That was the end of your peroration? We are grateful.

Chris Bryant: It was short.

Mr Speaker: It was very short. I am sure they did not leave because of you. Do not worry—don’t be too sensitive about it.

Damian Hinds: To be fair to the hon. Gentleman, these things happen at a quarter past three. It is an occupational hazard.

Free schools are one part of our expansion. This decade will have the largest expansion in school capacity for at least two generations, with 1 million new school places added and £7 billion of investment committed over the period.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I am really pleased that the Secretary of State eagerly anticipates the next Labour Government, just like so many parents and teachers, but let me be clear: our policy is no threat to any new or existing school, unlike the Government’s cuts. His Department’s accounts show that the academies sector ran a £2 billion operating deficit last year. Their net financial position is down overall and more trusts closed last year than ever before. He admitted last week that education needs billions more, so will he be asking the Chancellor to reverse all his cuts in full and in real terms?

Damian Hinds: We are investing in the school system, both through the additional £1.3 billion we found last year and through the capital moneys, to which I just referred, to fund the large expansion in the school system. Although these are questions to the Government, I think that everybody would be keen to hear more from the hon. Lady about how no school would be under threat from Labour party policy.

Mr Speaker: I call Gill Furniss—not here. Oh dear.

Asbestos Management Assurance Process

13. Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): When he plans to publish the results of the asbestos management assurance process survey of schools and academies. [907549]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The results of the asbestos management assurance process will be published in spring next year. Seventy-seven per cent. of schools have responded so far, but we expect all state-funded schools and academies to participate, so we have reopened the assurance process from today until February 2019 to give them a further opportunity to do so.

Meg Hillier: The problem with publishing this long-awaited information in the spring is that that is likely to be too late to properly influence the spending review. Given that 85% of schools have asbestos and the risks are getting greater as those buildings age, will the Minister make a serious commitment to providing the funding to schools to tackle that asbestos? Otherwise, there is no real incentive for them to come up with a plan, given the pinch on their budgets.

Nick Gibb: So far, 17,000 state-funded schools have responded to the survey; of those, 68% were assured by the appropriate responsible body. Since 2015, we have allocated £5.6 billion to those responsible for school building for essential maintenance, including removing or encapsulating asbestos when that is the safest course of action. In addition, through the £4.4 billion priority school building programme, we are rebuilding or refurbishing buildings in the worst condition, and asbestos is a factor in choosing which schools to rebuild.
Education Funding

14. Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the additional funding for education announced in Budget 2018 on education funding in real terms. [907550]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): In the Budget, the Government invested more than £1 billion of new funding for the Department for Education, including £695 million to improve the number and quality of apprenticeships, £400 million capital for schools, £100 million for the national retraining scheme and £84 million to improve children’s social care.

Rosie Cooper: The Secretary of State makes reference to all sorts of streams except revenue funding, so will he confirm that the Budget offered no additional revenue funding for schools and that means that, in real terms, per pupil funding will fall yet again next year, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has found?

Damian Hinds: No, Mr Speaker. Of course revenue funding is determined periodically at spending reviews. Since the last spending review, we have found an additional £1.3 billion to hold per pupil real terms funding constant on a nationwide level.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is not just the total amount of funding, but where and how it is spent? The implementation of the fairer funding formula is certainly welcome in Worcestershire.

Damian Hinds: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. Through the national funding formula—the fairer formula—we are taking on something that successive Governments have dodged to make sure that funding is based on need and the characteristics of pupils, rather than accidents of history.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): No wonder the Secretary of State has been slapped down by his own stats watchdog four times since he took office. The IFS found that per pupil funding is hundreds of pounds lower in real terms than it was in 2015 and is set to fall again next year without new funding, so I ask him again: will he be asking the Chancellor to reverse all his cuts in full and in real terms?

Damian Hinds: I have not been slapped down four times by anybody, to the best of my recollection. I appreciate the difficulties in managing school budgets, and I appreciate that those budgets are tight, but it is also true that we spend a great deal more on schools than we used to and that, by international standards, on multiple measures, we spend a relatively high amount on state education in this country.

Angela Rayner: I am really pleased that the Secretary of State has since clarified that the Chancellor’s “little extras” should in fact be called “small additional capital projects”. Perhaps he can also clarify that school capital spending has already been cut by nearly £4 billion a year. So the Budget offered very little and no extra. Now that the Prime Minister has promised austerity is over, will the Secretary of State ask the Chancellor to fully restore the education capital budget in real terms?

Damian Hinds: We are investing a great deal of capital both on expanding the school estate to create more high-quality places and in terms of its condition. The £400 million for additional small capital projects is on top of the £1.4 billion already allocated.

Maintained Nursery School Funding

17. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for maintained nursery schools. [907553]

Mr Speaker: Minister Zahawi.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Thank you, Mr Speaker—I will clear my throat. Maintained nursery schools support some of our most disadvantaged children, and they do experience higher costs than other providers. We will therefore be providing local authorities with supplementary funding of about £60 million a year up to 2020.

Matthew Pennycook: With the two-year transitional funding ending soon and the comprehensive spending review not expected until the summer, maintained nursery schools in my constituency are desperately struggling to plan and budget for the future. Until secure and sustainable funding arrangements are put in place, will the Minister at least commit to further additional transitional funding to protect maintained nurseries across England?

Nadhim Zahawi: The early years national funding formula for Greenwich has increased from £4.86 in 2016-17 to a provisional £6.17 in 2018-19. On top of this, in 2018-19, Greenwich will receive about £690,000 for its three maintained nurseries. My message to all local authorities is: do not do anything premature but wait for the spending review.

T-levels

18. Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the introduction of T-levels. [907554]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): We have made excellent progress and recently reached a significant milestone when we launched the procurement for the development of the first three T-levels for 2020. We are working closely with the selected providers that will deliver them from 2020, including several in the midlands, to make sure they have the right support in place.

Mr Jones: I very much welcome the introduction of T-levels. What funding and resources will be provided, particularly for facilities and other resources required to deliver T-levels successfully?

Damian Hinds: Over time, we are committing hundreds of millions of pounds in additional resourcing for T-levels. My hon. Friend is right to identify facilities and equipment, which is why we have committed £38 million in the first tranche of capital funding to support the initial roll-out.
The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We are considering the Public Account Committee’s recent recommendation that we review the exemption and will respond formally in December. Ofsted assesses the risks in all schools, including outstanding schools, and has the power to inspect any school if it has concerns.

Clive Efford: What confidence can parents in my constituency and others have in the Minister’s claim that 86% of schools are either outstanding or good when many have not been inspected for six years and some for as long as 11?

Nick Gibb: Ofsted assesses the triggers that will cause an inspection to happen even where a school is judged as outstanding and exempt from inspection—for example, if a school’s results fall, complaints are received from parents or there are safeguarding concerns. All those are triggers that will cause an inspection to happen even in an outstanding school. The hon. Gentleman can be confident, therefore, that a school that is judged good or outstanding is good or outstanding.

Topical Questions

T2. [907562] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): My Department continues its work to ensure that young people get the best start in life whatever their background. We are widening opportunity with our school reforms, reinforced through new programmes such as Opportunity North East; in the latest Budget, funding was provided for T-levels and apprenticeships to improve the quality of our technical education, so that we can rival productivity leaders such as Germany; and last week, our consultation on relationships, sex and health education closed with over 11,000 responses. These new subjects can help young people growing up in an ever more complex world.

Lucy Powell: I was pleased to see the Secretary of State arguing in the media recently for education funding to be a special case. Perhaps it was a shame that that came a week after the Budget rather than before it but, given that the Secretary of State recognises the very tight constraints on school budgets, does he share my regret, and the regret of many other people, about the phraseology used by the Chancellor when he talked of “little extras”?

Damian Hinds: I think it was a good thing that we were able to find hundreds of millions of pounds—£400 million—for additional capital spending in-year, on top of the £1.4 billion in capital already allocated.

T6. [907566] Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Statutory child protection interventions are continuing to rise at record levels. What can the Minister do to ensure that such interventions are used only for high-risk cases, and not as an alternative to family support?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): The law is clear: only children who are suffering, or at risk of suffering, significant harm receive child protection interventions. When it comes to support for children and families with wider needs, the statutory safeguarding guidance is also clear: local authorities should make a range of services available, including early help.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Looked-after children in secure accommodation have been subjected to more than 30,000 hours in solitary confinement over the past five years, in some cases for up to 23 hours a day. Leading medical experts have called for the Government to cease the practice immediately. Will the new secure academy schools be adopting it, and why is the Minister allowing such a contravention of children’s human rights to continue apace?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady has raised an important issue, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has also sought to address, and of which there has been some media coverage. Looked-after children are our responsibility: we are, ultimately, their parents. This is wrong, and should not be happening.

T3. [907564] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The national child abuse inquiry looked in detail at what happened to kids who behaved badly and were then put in children’s homes by magistrates courts. Today, the same children are excluded from schools and left to their own devices. What assessment has been made of the root causes of the behaviour that led to their exclusion?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman has raised very important points about a subject in which he has considerable expertise. This is one of the reasons that we asked Edward Timpson to conduct a thorough review of exclusions policy. It is done better in some places than others, and it is important for us to learn from that. It is also important that, when children are excluded, alternative provision should be the start of something positive and new, rather than the end of positive education.

T7. [907567] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): How many secondary schools offer Mandarin as a language choice, and what can we do to increase the number of schools that offer it?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): My hon. Friend has raised an important point. In 2017, approximately 91 state-maintained schools entered students for Chinese GCSE. There were 3,654 GCSE entries in that year, and 2,800 A-level entries in 2018. Maintained secondary schools must teach a foreign language at key stage 3, and we fund 64 schools for the Mandarin excellence programme, which is intended to put 5,000 students on track towards becoming fluent in Mandarin.

T4. [907564] Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The University and College Union has described the Chancellor’s Budget as a “missed opportunity to...address the urgent financial challenges facing our education system”.

Ofsted: Inspection of Outstanding Schools

21. Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What plans has he to introduce routine Ofsted inspections for outstanding schools; and if he will make a statement. [907557]
Will the Minister agree to make representations to the Chancellor and ask him to follow the example of the Scottish Government by delivering a 5.1% real-terms increase in the next spending review?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Matters relating to our university lecturers and staff and how they are paid are matters for universities, as they are autonomous institutions. As for the new pension arrangements and their potential impact on universities, there will be a consultation to which they can contribute.

T8. [907568] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Last year's adjustment to the funding formula was a welcome first step towards fairer funding for counties such as my county of Staffordshire, but it was only a first step. Will the Minister please explain what more will be done in the coming years to ensure that that gap is narrowed?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right to point out that we made a decisive and historic move towards fairer funding by introducing the national funding formula—something avoided by previous Governments. That was backed by an extra £1.3 billion, in addition to the money allocated at the 2015 spending review. Staffordshire will gain 3.2% per pupil for its schools by 2019-20, compared with 2017-18 funding levels.

T5. [907565] Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): At the weekend, Ofsted warned that gangs are slipping knives into children’s bags to get them expelled from school so that they can be recruited to carry drugs. Today, headteachers in London are told not to exclude too readily pupils with weapons, making them easy prey. The warning from Ofsted comes as the Children’s Commissioner, Anne Longfield, calls for the Government to fine schools that expel children. What is the Government’s response?

Nick Gibb: All schools need to be safe and disciplined environments in which pupils feel happy and able to fulfil their potential. We continue to work with the Home Office to consider how best to get the message of its serious violence strategy into schools, and we have ensured that its #knifefree anti-knife campaign has been disseminated to all schools in England.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The second Bercow report, “Ten Years On”, highlights that there is a very strong correlation between poor speech, language and communication skills, and children who are excluded from schools. Tackling this issue early on can make an enormous difference to children’s life chances. Does my right hon. Friend agree that focusing on this area in the early years is more important than ever, and can he assure us that we can still deliver these services given the pressures on many local authorities that provide these services?

Damian Hinds: I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of early language and literacy. I have set an ambition that we halve, from 28% to 14%, the percentage of children who reach the end of reception year without the level that they require to get the most out of primary school. This is one of the reasons that we are investing so much in the early years, including the two-year-old offer, which was not available under any previous Government, but we need to go further and we will have more to say in due course.

T9. [907569] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I was not happy with the Minister’s answer earlier, so maybe the Secretary of State can do better. Will the Government rule out charging higher tuition fees for STEM than for non-STEM subjects once the Augar review is complete?

Mr Gyimah: I am afraid to disappoint the hon. Gentleman; as I said in my earlier answer, I cannot comment on leaks of a review that has not been published, and my answer has not changed.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Every year, we rightly celebrate the achievement of students getting their A-level results. Will the Secretary of State set out a plan to bring forward a similar celebration for young people and their achievements in vocational qualifications as well?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I thank my right hon. Friend for that question. She is absolutely right that a lot of coverage is given to A-level and GCSE results, and that very little is given to all the other vocational qualifications. We must ensure that we do everything to encourage the media to do more to highlight those achievements as well.

T10. [907570] Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Children in Hackney with special educational needs have had their support protected because Hackney Council found funding from other sources to backfill the cuts in Government funding, but after cuts of 40% to the borough’s budget, and with £30 million-worth of cuts still to come in the next four years, that is now being stretched. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that children with special educational needs get the full support that they need for the rest of their lives?

Nadhim Zahawi: I echo the Secretary of State’s words; he has put on the record that every school should be a special educational needs and disability school. Investment in SEND has risen by £1 billion since 2013 to £6 billion. We have opened 34 new special free schools and 55 special free schools are due to open. In July, we gave local authorities the opportunity to bid for new special alternative provision schools in their areas.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Sixty-four per cent. of maintained nursery schools are in deprived areas, such as Sandbank in my constituency. Will the Minister give special consideration to this fact when deciding future funding?

Nadhim Zahawi: We will certainly give that point special consideration. We are working with the sector to look at the additional value that it provides, and I thank all local authorities who are helping us with the work to look at the economic model before the SR.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): There was not a single penny in the Budget for further education—a sector that has lost a quarter of its funding since 2010.
What does the Minister say to Greenhead College, which serves my constituency and has written to me to say that it fears it will not be able to provide the education that our young people deserve if cuts continue?

Anne Milton: We have protected the base rate of funding for FE colleges. I have said before that we are looking at the resilience of the sector. I would be happy for the college to contact me, so that we can discuss what steps might be taken. The strategic college improvement fund and a number of other funds are available to help colleges to improve.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): We have excellent academy schools in Bromley, but we have been badly let down by the failings, unveiled by the Education and Skills Funding Agency, in the Education for the 21st Century trust. Will my right hon. Friend meet me urgently to discuss the findings of the ESFA report, and in particular the extraordinary circumstances where the chief executive who presided over and profited from these failures has been allowed to remain in post as headteacher of one of the largest schools?

Damian Hinds: Where there are issues and where problems emerge, we must act on them quickly. I should say that the vast majority of academies and multi-academy trusts have been a great force for good in our education, but of course I would be happy, as always, to meet my hon. Friend.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State share my concern and that of Members across the House that The Observer identified a £195 million overspend by councils on high needs in the last year? Will he actually respond to my request that he agreed to in the summer to meet me to discuss special educational needs and problems in Derbyshire?

Nadhim Zahawi: We recognise that local authorities are facing cost pressures on high needs, and I assure the hon. Lady that we are monitoring the impact of our high needs national funding formula on local authority spending decisions. We are also keeping our overall level of funding under review in the context of the next spending review.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating our schools, rather than running them down, on the excellent work they did around Remembrance Day parades this weekend? Across the country, schools did fantastic exhibitions. I do not know about other Members, but I saw more children on Remembrance Day parades this year than I have ever seen before, and I am sure that that has a lot to do with the schools.

Damian Hinds: I concur entirely with my right hon. Friend. Many schools have used the centenary as an opportunity for learning across a whole range of aspects connected to the first world war, but particularly Remembrance Sunday. The powerful and evocative commemorations that many schools have taken part in is a great example to us all.
Stop and Search

3.38 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to make a statement on proposed changes to police stop-and-search powers.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government fully support the police in using their stop-and-search powers when they have lawful grounds to do so. This is a vital policing tool when used correctly. We will always ensure that police have the necessary powers to keep people safe, and that is why we work very closely with the National Police Chiefs’ Council to keep under review the stop-and-search powers that the police need to help keep the public safe. This House should be clear that we have no plans to change the requirement that reasonable grounds for suspicion are needed before a routine stop and search is carried out.

We are, however, working with the police, including the national police lead for stop and search, to see how we can reduce bureaucracy and increase efficiency in the use of stop and search. The Home Secretary has been clear that that is something we are looking at, and that he will say more on this in due course.

The House will be aware that the Government introduced a comprehensive reform package for stop and search in 2014 in response to evidence that the power was not used fairly, effectively or, in some cases, lawfully. Since introducing those reforms, the arrest rate following a stop and search has risen to 17%—the highest since records began. As the Home Secretary has said, he wants police officers to feel confident, trusted and supported when they are using stop-and-search powers lawfully. If there are things getting in the way of them using those powers, these need to be looked at.

The Government are determined to do all they can to break the deadly and dreadful cycle of violence that devastates the lives of individuals, families and communities. That is why we will always look to ensure that the police have the powers they need and our support to use them lawfully.

Afzal Khan: We have all read the reports that suggest that the Home Secretary is pressing for greater use of stop-and-search powers and amending the grounds of reasonable suspicion that currently govern stop and search. Does the Minister agree that that is, in effect, a move to random stop and search not based on evidence? [HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] Okay. Is the Minister aware that the current policy, which he wants to remove, was introduced by one of the Home Secretary’s predecessors, who is now Prime Minister, and that she made that reform of police stop-and-search powers based on evidence, not on chasing easy headlines? Has the Home Secretary bothered to examine that evidence?

The use of the stop-and-search scheme was announced by the then Home Secretary in a statement to Parliament on 30 April 2014. She stated that the principal aims of the scheme were to achieve greater transparency and community involvement in the use of stop-and-search powers, and to support a more intelligence-led approach, leading to better outcomes.

Is the Home Secretary aware of the very poor outcomes of the previous implementation of stop and search, and that the Home Office itself and the College of Policing, as well as Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary, found that there were only 9% or 10% arrest rates from random stop and search? Does the Minister accept that this was a colossal waste of police resources? As a former police officer, I can tell him that that is the case. Is he aware that, according to his Department’s own research, black people are eight times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched, and Asian people are twice as likely?

Finally, intelligence-led stop and search does work. It is an important tool in the police arsenal. I am in favour of it. The Labour party is in favour of it. Random stop and search does not work, and the Minister has no evidence that it will. We do know, however, that it can poison community-police relations. Is he not trying to distract from the fact that knife crime is soaring under his Government, while they have cut 21,000 police officers?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Unfortunately, this all starts from a false premise, which is newspaper speculation that is entirely wrong. I go back to my statement: this House should be clear that we have no plans to change the requirement that reasonable grounds for suspicion are needed before a routine stop and search is carried out. We are not going back to random stop and search, to use his words.

The hon. Gentleman set out eloquently the case for reform that this Government made on stop and search, which means that stop and search is now conducted in a totally transformed environment in terms of the transparency and accountability around it. We are now at record levels for the ratio between stop and arrest, so we are not going back to the bad old days when over 1.4 million people were stopped with only 8% or 9% of them arrested. That is not what this is about. This is about recognising that we now have a million fewer stops and searches than we did in 2009-10, and that we are—I think on a cross-party basis—absolutely determined to bear down on this horrendous spike in violent crime. We need to be sure that the police have the confidence to use the tools at their disposal, and stop and search is one of those tools. There is evidence that the police have lost some confidence in using it, and what the Home Secretary is setting out in his interviews and articles is his determination to restore that confidence and give the police confidence in the powers that they have. We can look at ways of reducing the bureaucracy and anything else that is getting in the way of that, but this is about trying to save lives.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I accept fully that the previous way in which stop and search was used was often too random, but there is no question but that it should play a part in the reduction of violence and the use of drugs in some areas. There has been a large increase in gang warfare and the use of guns and pistols in areas such as mine, where many of the people who are moving weapons and drugs around know that they can, for the most part, do so with impunity because they are unlikely to be stopped and searched. We therefore need to get the police to apply the process much better, so that we make it clear to those people moving guns and weapons around that there is a high likelihood of their being stopped and searched.
Mr Hurd: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, who speaks with a great deal of experience from his constituency and with passion and expertise in this area. Stop and search is one tool in a box that has to combine robust police law enforcement with superb prevention and early intervention work in the community, as he knows. The evidence is that although the police have improved their practice, as is reflected in improved arrest outcomes, they have lost some confidence in using the stop-and-search tool. The Home Secretary is saying that we as a Government want to send a signal that we expect the police to use these powers lawfully and in an intelligence-led, targeted way. There is no room for stopping anyone on the basis of race or ethnicity. This is about sending a message to the communities about the increased risk of getting caught.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As in England at present, the police in Scotland can stop and search only when they have reasonable grounds to do so. Violent crime in Scotland is down 44% since 2007-08, and offensive weapons offences have been reduced by almost two thirds. However, my colleagues in the Scottish Government accept that there is no room for complacency. In Scotland, treating knife crime as a public health issue is widely recognised as having been highly effective. Can the Minister confirm that his Department is looking carefully at the lessons to be learned from Scotland? Can he also tell us when the Offensive Weapons Bill will come back to the Floor of the House?

Mr Hurd: I can certainly say to the hon. and learned Lady that there is a great deal to learn from Glasgow, as there was from London 10 years ago and as there has been from Boston, Cincinnati and other places that have borne down successfully on violence. The key lesson is about the balance between robust law enforcement and good prevention, and about the multi-agency public health approach, which is exactly what we are doing through the serious violence taskforce. That is exactly what we are doing and good prevention, and about the multi-agency public health approach, which is exactly what we are doing through the serious violence taskforce. That is exactly what we are doing and it has had a powerful impact in terms of focusing work on this ground-breaking reform. It was necessary, highlighted the critical issue of confidence to use this tool on the frontline. I have heard, on patrol in Liverpool and elsewhere, that that lack of confidence exists, and that is what we now need to address. The powers are there, and we want the police to use them lawfully.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to see that the hon. Member for Eltham appears to be experiencing some pain, but he is a brave fellow and I am sure he will bear up stoically and with fortitude. Let us hear what he has to say.

Clive Efford: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have pulled a muscle in my back.

Intelligence-led policing starts at community level, so it is not therefore a shame that there was no money in the Budget to increase investment in community-led policing? They are the people who know who to stop and search at local level, and we need to see a return to effective local policing and more police in local neighbourhood teams.

Mr Hurd: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman’s back pain. I fully understand the point he is making and he will have much support for those sentiments on the Benches behind me. There was new money in the Budget for counter-terrorism and for mental health services, which is extremely important for local policing. In terms of budgets for local forces, I ask him to have a little patience and wait for the police funding settlement in early December.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Having served on three operational tours in Northern Ireland, I can tell the Minister that stop and search was an effective weapon against the terrorist. It was so effective because we had soldiers on the street picking up intelligence, so that when patrols went out they knew exactly who was doing what. I support the request by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for more bobbies on the beat, to get the intelligence that we need to make stop and search far more effective.

Mr Hurd: I fully understand the point that my hon. Friend makes and he knows from our conversations that I have a lot of sympathy with it. The steps I took last year with the funding settlement have resulted in almost every single police force in England and Wales beginning to recruit again. I also welcome the steps taken by the police leadership to create a more consistent model of neighbourhood policing across the country. That is what the public we serve want to see, and—as I have said—I hope to take further steps in the 2019-20 funding settlement in early December.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I welcome the Minister’s clear statement that the Government will not remove the requirement of reasonable grounds for stop and search. The Minister talked about future reforms: can he make a commitment to the House today that any reforms will be based on evidence, and that that evidence will be published to the House?
Mr Hurd: I can certainly assure the right hon. Gentleman—and former colleague—that policy making in Government will, as ever, be evidence led. As and when we have taken decisions on what we would like to do, we will engage fully on that, including with Parliament.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One way to make more officers available for stop and search would be to bear down on bureaucracy in policing, especially in London. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about the expansion of Mayor Khan’s Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime—MOPAC—from £36 million in its last year under my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) to £61 million today? That is a 70% increase in just two years on police bureaucracy, which would pay for 233 extra officers in London able to carry out stop and search.

Mr Hurd: As a fellow London MP, representing constituents in Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, I have a personal view on this which I think is reflected by my constituents. Given a choice between £1 of their money being spent on more bureaucracy in the centre and £1 being spent on local police officers, we both know what their priority would be. It is for the Mayor and his office to explain to the public they serve their decisions and the allocation of their budgets at this time.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I was first stopped and searched in the wake of the Scarman report aged 12, and it was so scary that I wet myself. We got to a place where the Home Office did a review that found there was no discernible, significant decrease in crime with the use of stop and search, and the current Prime Minister reached a cross-party consensus on the issue in the House. I caution the Minister against his party breaking that consensus, which would damage the issue in the House. I caution the Minister against his party breaking that consensus, which would damage the issue in the House. I caution the Minister against his party breaking that consensus, which would damage the issue in the House. I caution the Minister against his party breaking that consensus, which would damage the issue in the House.

Mr Hurd: I understand where the right hon. Gentleman’s passion comes from. I have a great deal of respect for his passion, and I also have a great deal of respect for the fact that he has stood up and offered to serve on the serious violence taskforce because of his passion and his insight into the problem and the drivers that underlie it, not least the drugs market. He and I have sat in on presentations on the subject.

To give some reassurance, I meant what I said at the Dispatch Box. There is no appetite or desire to go back to the bad old days of stop and search, but we have gone from a situation where over 1.4 million people were stopped in 2009-10 to one where 1 million fewer people were stopped last year. In the context of the problem we face—this scourge, this terrible spike in serious violence—we have to make sure that all the tools in the box are being used.

The reality is that stop and search is an effective tool. I will give one brief example. In one week in January, during Operation Engulf, 27 people were arrested outside Stratford station, and 10 highly offensive, dangerous, scary weapons were seized. Stop and search has its place, but it must be used lawfully and it must be targeted. Nothing about the Government’s approach to the reform has changed.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): It is vital that stop and search is intelligence-led, but I think the Minister agrees that the nature of the current funding formula curtails the ability of some forces to be intelligence-led. Will he do what he can when it comes to December to make sure that the funding formula is fairer and that we can have fair stop and search across this country?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his ingenuity in introducing the fair funding formula into an urgent question on stop and search. The short answer to his question is yes.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for confirming, or clarifying, that the Government have no plan to remove reasonable grounds for stop and search. However, I find it difficult to believe what he says that the police feel less confident about stop and search; the information I have is that they feel more confident because of body-worn cameras. What more will he do to reduce the negative impact of stop and search on young people, especially where they feel shame or embarrassment that they are perceived to be criminals? What more is he doing to build trust between the community and the police?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady talks about trust, and it is incumbent on the police, and on the police and crime commissioners, to be highly proactive in engaging with communities, particularly after a section 60 notice, in explaining the reasons for the section 60 notice and its consequences. People need to understand the motivation for a section 60 notice or for the deployment of stop and search, and they need to see how that connects with the results.

The hon. Lady talks about trust, and it is incumbent on the police, and on the police and crime commissioners, to be highly proactive in engaging with communities, particularly after a section 60 notice, in explaining the reasons for the section 60 notice and its consequences. People need to understand the motivation for a section 60 notice or for the deployment of stop and search, and they need to see how that connects with the results.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Most knife crime in provincial towns is predicated on organised crime gangs running drugs from city areas by involving young people and making them carry knives. What more can my right hon. Friend do about the organised crime gangs that are running drugs along county lines? What is he doing to try to steer young people away from getting involved in this activity and potentially committing these offences?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point, because county lines are rapidly emerging as a scourge of many market towns and areas that have absolutely no history of this crime. It is deeply unsettling for people so, through him, I reassure the public that the Government take it extremely seriously. There is more...
money going in to support the police in better co-ordinating their efforts, because crime that crosses borders is a challenge.

There is also considerable effort going in to try to target, identify, steer and protect vulnerable people, particularly vulnerable young people, from getting caught up in this activity. A combination of robust policing and really good prevention and early intervention work will hopefully protect these youngsters and stop this crime.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Greater Manchester police have stated that they have no numeric targets for stop and search or for an overall crime reduction that could be attributed to stop and search, because they believe that such targets, if they existed, could distort officer behaviour. Does the Minister agree? Will he confirm that perceived concerns about a reduced use of stop and search will not lead to a focus on quantity over quality in the future?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady makes an important point. One of the most important things we did as a Government, and the then Home Secretary—now Prime Minister—did, was to scrap a lot of targets, because she knows, with her experience, that targets can distort behaviour. There is no interest among Government Members in this being a numbers game; we are responding to some evidence that the police have lost some confidence in stop and search. We want them to feel that confidence, not least with the advent and prevalence of body-worn video. We want them to use their existing powers and to continue to use them lawfully.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It may have been intelligence-led when I was recently stopped and searched outside 1 Parliament Street, but I do not complain—I want to see more use of it made. But that does imply more police officers to do it, does it not?

Mr Hurd: I cannot comment on what intelligence the police had that led them to that decision—obviously they got the memo! My right hon. Friend’s main point is right, and I have made it clear from the Dispatch Box that, as we approach the end of austerity, this Government are determined to make sure that our police system has the resources needed. That is why we took the steps last year that have resulted in an additional £460 million of public investment in our police system and almost every police force in the country recruiting again.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I am not being flippant when I say that people with my accent understand sensitivities relating to the use of police powers, but our chief constable and police and crime commissioner on Merseyside tell me that stop and search is a vital tool to combat serious crime. Its use by police officers has increased on Merseyside. Does the Minister agree that if it is intelligence-led, community-focused and proportionate, it should be encouraged, not least to combat knife crime in places such as St Helens?

Mr Hurd: I do, and the hon. Gentleman is echoing exactly the argument I have made at this Dispatch Box. Stop and search is a vital tool and we want to see it used; we continue to want to see it used lawfully, in a targeted, intelligence-led way, but we want to see it used.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend remind the House as to which community’s members are predominantly the victims of the violent crime that these measures are designed to address?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an important point, one that has been echoed by people such as Trevor Phillips. It is clear to us—I speak as a London MP—that the tragic faces staring at us out of the pages of London’s Evening Standard are almost overwhelmingly those of young black boys.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Surely the Minister must recognise that the only way we are going to deal adequately with violent crime, particularly in the west midlands, is by having an adequate number of police. We have lost 3,000 policemen over the past two or three years, and surely they have to be restored. More importantly, the police rely on intelligence, which is why we need more community policemen, as that is the best way to deal with crime.

Mr Hurd: Last year’s funding settlement did put more money into west midlands policing, and it was a settlement the hon. Gentleman voted against. I will be coming to the House in early December with our plans for 2019-20. He is right about the need for a robust law enforcement response to this scourge of serious violence on our streets, but it also needs to be balanced, as I am sure he knows, with excellent work on prevention and early intervention. This Government have committed almost a quarter of a billion pounds of taxpayers’ money to that prevention and intervention work in communities up and down the country. It is that balance that will give us the success we all want.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): When out on patrol with my local police, I have seen how the reasonable use of stop and search helps them to target drugs and disrupt the gangs, and has led to a drop in serious harmful violence, so I fully support it. Will the Minister look again at extending the powers so that “smelling cannabis” could be reasonable grounds for a stop and search?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is a great champion of her local police, so it is no surprise that she has been out with them, and I know that she welcomes the fact that they are currently recruiting 150-odd officers. Our consultation on the extension of stop-and-search powers in relation to corrosive substances, drones and laser pens has just finished. I will take on board my hon. Friend’s point about cannabis.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Minister said that a million fewer people are stopped and searched than in 2010 and that the success rate then was around 10%. What are the results under the new regime—are we getting more convictions?
Mr Hurd: Yes. The number of stops and searches has fallen and the proportion of them that result in arrest has risen from around 9% to 17%.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Nobody wants to go back to the old stop and search, which was deemed racist, but there have been 259 knife deaths in the country so far this year, and there were recently five in London over a nine-day period. Whatever our policy is now, it is clearly not working.

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is entirely right that the losses are terrible and the statistics are awful and unacceptable to us. We have been here before, 10 years ago, in London. We beat it then and we will beat it again, through the combination of robust policing and really effective prevention and early intervention. The robust policing will change the numbers in the short term and the prevention and early-intervention work will change the numbers in the long term. Everything we have learned from London, Glasgow, Boston and Cincinnati tells us that it is that combination that works, so we will stick to that plan.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In Walsall, four people were stabbed and killed in a 12-month period. Does my right hon. Friend agree that stop and search is an essential tool for the police tackling this heinous crime?

Mr Hurd: It is a vital tool. It leads to arrests and the seizure of weapons and it reduces the risk of violence, crime and death. It is a vital tool in our police’s armoury, yet all the evidence suggests that although the reform has clearly delivered an improvement in terms of the arrest ratio and stop and search’s integrity, numbers have fallen to a low level. The Government would like to see the increased use of stop and search, while making sure that it remains lawful, legal, targeted and intelligence led.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the issue is about not only what the police do but educating our young people? In my constituency, we have an excellent charity called Stand Against Violence that goes into schools to deliver workshops and education to young people on how to deal with these issues and prevent crime. Will the Minister meet me to learn about the charity’s work, because there are definitely lessons to learn?

Mr Hurd: As a former Minister for Civil Society, I am absolutely persuaded about the critical role that the voluntary sector is going to play in the battle against violent crime. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and stand against violence. Public money is available to support organisations that intervene to prevent and divert young people from crime. In fact, just this weekend we announced £18 million of funding for organisations up and down the country to do just that.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree with the Minister that the use of body-worn cameras can significantly increase public confidence in stop and search and other police activities. How extensive are the plans for the roll-out of body-worn cameras?

Mr Hurd: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that the use of body-worn cameras is a game-changer. When I talk to police officers, they tell me that it absolutely changes their levels of confidence in being in those situations. It is also, of course, of huge benefit to the people the police stop, search and question. It changes the dynamic of the conversation. The most recent figures I saw showed that 65,000 cameras had been deployed across 41 forces, and from memory I think we are on track to get to 80,000 in short order. We are proud to have supported that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As someone who, in the past, has stopped and searched suspects when serving as a special constable, may I say to the police Minister that the reasonable grounds available to police officers are enhanced by the deployment of drug-sniffer dogs and knife arches? Can we have more of both, please?

Mr Hurd: May I, through you, Mr Speaker, congratulate my hon. Friend on his service and experience? We are absolutely determined to make sure that the police have the resources and the powers that they need. The Home Secretary keeps this matter under constant review, and I am sure that he will take his comments extremely seriously.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) ever stopped and searched his own constituents. Further and better particulars on that important matter should be vouchsafed to the House at an appropriate time. It is always good to be reminded of his service as a special constable as well as a member of the Kettering Borough Council.
Nuclear Power: Toshiba

4.10 pm

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 Toshiba’s decision to withdraw from the development of a nuclear power plant at Moorside in Cumbria.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): At its board meeting last Thursday, the Japanese company Toshiba confirmed that it proposed to wind up its subsidiary NuGen following an earlier decision to exit the overseas nuclear power business. This followed the well known financial difficulties of Toshiba’s US subsidiary, Westinghouse. Following that, Toshiba considered the sale of NuGen, but, having failed to agree terms, the Toshiba board decided that the company will instead be wound up. I met board members of Toshiba in Tokyo on Wednesday, and they confirmed that the board’s decision was a commercial one. The decision is ultimately a matter for Toshiba and we fully understand the challenging circumstances that that company has faced over the past 18 months.

The Moorside site in west Cumbria is owned by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and the land will revert to the NDA. It remains a potential site for nuclear new build and the NDA will consider a range of options for its future. The Government are fully committed to new nuclear being part of a diverse supply of energy. The EDF-led Hinkley Point C is under construction to new nuclear being part of a diverse supply of energy. The UK’s ability to generate low-carbon energy, and the prospect of new civil nuclear in Cumbria? Does he know that if the Government had offered terms to NuGen, to Kepco, to Toshiba that were on a par with those that they have offered on other sites in the country, they would have proceeded if, and only if, they satisfy the most stringent safety and regulatory approvals process and if, at the point of a contract being issued, they demonstrate value for money compared with alternative sources of electricity generation available at the time.

I recognise that last week’s announcement will be a disappointing but not an unexpected one to the people of west Cumbria. One thing is certain: west Cumbria will continue to be a centre for excellence in civil nuclear. It is of huge strategic importance to the UK and a source of large numbers of highly skilled and well-paid jobs and will be for many decades to come.

John Woodcock: And so the people of Cumbria are thrown under a bus. I thank the Secretary of State for that statement, but I have to say that it is extraordinary that he has had to be dragged to the Chamber to make it rather than offering it proactively on a project that will affect up to 21,000 jobs in the constituency of the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and many, many in my constituency and across Cumbria.

In his initial statement, the Secretary of State did not even commit to a new civil nuclear power plant in the Cumbrian area. It is just not good enough. It is not good enough for the Government to hide behind the idea that this is simply a commercial decision, because he knows that if the Government had offered terms to NuGen, to Kepco, to Toshiba that were on a par with those that they have offered on other sites in the country, this deal could have been salvaged.

I would like to hear from the Secretary of State this afternoon. Surely this is not the end. Will he commit to working with the people of Cumbria, their MPs, their council, and their local enterprise partnership to salvage the prospect of new civil nuclear in Cumbria? Does he recognise the hole that losing Moorside will create for the UK’s ability to generate low-carbon energy, and does he see the potentially irreversible decline in absolutely essential nuclear skills in Cumbria for the nation if civil nuclear is not allowed to go ahead on the site?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that the nuclear industry is very important to his constituents, as it is to those of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison). The hon. Gentleman knows that no one is more committed than I am to the future of nuclear power in this country. It is this Government who have revived nuclear power following more than 25 years in which no new nuclear power station was inaugurated. He knows that the approach that we have taken to new nuclear power stations is that they should be developer-led. That has always been the case since the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) was Secretary of State and established this approach and this policy.

The hon. Gentleman knows very well, because he talks to the executives himself, that the problems that Toshiba has encountered during the past 18 months, since the entry into chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings of its Westinghouse subsidiary, have made for a fundamental review of its strategy. It has decided, for commercial reasons, which the board of Toshiba told me, in person, on Wednesday, that it wants to concentrate on its activities away from international nuclear. The announcement is a consequence of that. Obviously, it is not possible to enter into negotiations with a counter-party that is exiting the business and does not have the financial opportunity to be able to take on this project. That has been clear, as he knows, for some time.

I was certainly very clear in my response to the hon. Gentleman that I regard the site, when it returns to the NDA, as available for further projects, and I will work very closely with those in the industry, including his predecessor. Of course I will meet the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland, and other people who take the same interest that I do in the future of nuclear in this country, and particularly in west Cumbria.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure my community that this Government do back nuclear through the nuclear sector deal, that he recognises the strategic importance of nuclear to meet our energy and our environmental requirements, and that he values the highly skilled workforce in my constituency and, indeed, across Cumbria, who stand ready to design, build, commission and operate Moorside in Copeland?

Greg Clark: I pay tribute to the workforce and the community that my hon. Friend represents, and indeed to her leadership and her advocacy for the case for recognising the strategic importance of that, as well as to that of her neighbouring MPs. I enjoyed spending time with her during the summer visiting Sellafield, as I have done before, and in particular looking at the opportunities in the supply chain for new nuclear, in which Cumbria has clearly a lot to offer, given not just the heritage but the actuality of the skills there.
We continue our programme of new nuclear builds; it is important that they should be developer-led. As I said, there is a pipeline of proposed new projects, but it is important that the regulatory conditions are met and that each proposal offers value for money. There is a very bright future for the highly skilled workforce in my hon. Friend’s constituency, now and in the future. Through the sector deal that was agreed enthusiastically between the industry, the Government and local partners, we are investing in the future, including in those skills.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Toshiba’s decision to withdraw from Moorside is a blow to the UK’s energy security, its decarbonisation goals, and the economy of Cumbria. But let us be clear where the real responsibility lies. The Cumbrian chamber of commerce, and the GMB and Prospect trade unions, among others, have all laid the blame with this Government for their lack of clarity over funding and their ultimate failure to take a direct stake in Moorside—something that Labour has repeatedly committed to do.

So, first, will the Secretary of State reaffirm a promise made to the people of Copeland during last year’s by-election when they were told that voting Conservative would ensure a new nuclear plant at Moorside, and will he describe his plan for salvaging the development? Secondly, Moorside was projected to provide about 7% of the UK’s electricity. If the Secretary of State cannot commit to the future of Moorside, can he describe the contingency plans the Government have in place to guarantee the UK’s energy security?

Thirdly, the electricity produced by Moorside would be low-carbon, which is key to meeting the UK’s future carbon budgets, so if the Secretary of State cannot commit to the future of Moorside, can he describe what additional measures the Government will take to reduce the UK’s greenhouse gas emissions? Finally, what contingency plans does the Secretary of State have in place for the economic development of west Cumbria, to which Moorside would have brought a reported 6,000 jobs in the construction phase and 1,000 permanent jobs thereafter?

Greg Clark: I am rather surprised by the statement and questions of the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey). First, it is widely known that Toshiba has had to engage in a corporate restructuring because its major nuclear subsidiary, Westinghouse, had to enter bankruptcy proceedings. That is what has happened. When I met the board of Toshiba last week, it was clear that that was the reason it is retreating. That is the central fact and the reason it is moving out of NuGen.

The hon. Lady asked about the Government’s approach to new nuclear. The policy of this Government is clear: we are in favour of new nuclear as part of a diverse and low-carbon energy mix. We are the first Government for 25 years actually to deliver a new nuclear power station. As my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland mentioned, the sector deal we have struck with the industry has been very widely supported. For the first time, we are training a new generation of nuclear engineers through the nuclear apprenticeship programme. It is an important industry now, and it will be an important industry in the future.

One of the things I find when I talk to investors in the nuclear industry is some concern at the complete absence of a united policy on nuclear on behalf of the Labour party. We would think from hearing the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles that the Labour party was in favour of nuclear power, whereas the leader of her party, who I assume has some influence on policy, has said:

“…I stand here as somebody who is passionately opposed to nuclear power and nuclear weapons in equal measure.”—[Official Report, 13 December 2011; Vol. 537, c. 699.]

The shadow Chancellor has said that he would end nuclear power “in the first 100 days of a Labour Government”.

It is no wonder that the trade unions the hon. Lady refers to have said that her own party’s energy plans would not leave the lights on.

Our approach is to continue with the programme of nuclear new build that we have. It is subject to being developer-led and, as is strictly necessary, to the safety case being made in each example, as well as to establishing value for money. It is, after all, the taxpayers or consumers who pay the bills, and we will always have that in mind as we continue our programme.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is a most cerebral fellow, and also unfailingly courteous, but there is a bit of pressure on time, so if he can zip through it, with that rapier-like brain of his, that would be greatly appreciated by the House.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are to develop a nuclear industry with the skills and the supply chain necessary to deliver baseload electricity that is reliable and cost-effective, it really is essential to avoid the kind of long gaps in procurement—for example, between Sizewell B and Hinkley C—that we saw under Labour? Will he intensify his work to find a financing model that is equally attractive to our long-term funds as it could be to overseas investors?

Greg Clark: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his important work in re-establishing the civil nuclear industry in this country. He is absolutely right: it is not just investment gaps that cause problems; we lose the ability to train workers in that industry, and we are having to restart training nuclear engineers. In previous statements to this House, I have said that we have accepted the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee about looking at new models for financing new nuclear. It is right that we should do so, and in so doing we will proceed with deploying new nuclear power in this country.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Secretary of State should indeed have come to the House with a statement on this matter, because it demonstrates clearly that nuclear plants are not economically viable. Will this failure finally lead the UK Government to realise that they must scrap plans to set up new plants for the declining, dangerous nuclear sector? Will the Secretary of State now commit to ruling out increased subsidies to other nuclear developments?
With the inevitable impact on the UK’s ability to meet its carbon reduction targets, does the Secretary of State regret his Government’s decision three years ago to cut investment in green technologies vastly, for ideological reasons, including the infamous betrayal of the £1 billion Peterhead carbon capture and storage project? The latest failure of nuclear is yet more evidence that renewables, growing cheaper and more reliable, are the future of low-carbon energy. Will the Secretary of State now finally properly commit to investing in renewables, including carbon capture and storage, to avoid falling even further behind the rest of the world?

**Greg Clark:** There is no one more committed than I am to the role of renewables in decarbonising our electricity supply. In fact, I am proud that the UK has delivered the fastest rate of decarbonisation in the G20 in the last years. We have created more than 400,000 jobs—many of them in Scotland—in low-carbon businesses and the supply chain. Renewable capacity in this country has quadrupled since 2010, and 30% of our electricity comes from renewables. Our record on renewables stands comparison with that of anyone else in the world.

However, my belief is that we should have a mix of low-carbon energy sources, and it is important that we should have low-carbon power from nuclear as part of that mix. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not recognise and pay tribute to Scotland’s proud nuclear tradition. Many people are employed now, and have been employed in the past, in nuclear—at Chapelcross, Dounreay, Hunterston and Torness. The former leader of the hon. Gentleman’s party actually wrote to EDF to request and support the extension of the life of Hunterston and Torness well into the 2020s, so that they could continue to provide those jobs and that power. The hon. Gentleman talks a different game from his party’s correspondence.

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): From where I am standing, it appears the Government do not have a coherent energy policy, particularly with regard to nuclear, and that has clearly had an impact on the Cumbrian economy. Given what has happened at Moorside, what does the Minister intend to do to support the Cumbrian economy?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is a great champion of the nuclear sector in Cumbria. It has a bright future. As he knows from the sector deal, there is investment in the supply chain and in reducing the cost of new nuclear, which will be essential if it is to compete with other sources of power. There are also great opportunities through decommissioning, not just in this country, but in selling expertise around the world. Cumbria is the centre of that expertise; it has a strong strategic role in our economy; and we will back it all the way.

**Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): We are now entirely reliant on foreign investment to support new nuclear build in our country. If businesses abandon their plans, as Toshiba has done, that will affect the generation of new electricity supply and the costs borne ultimately by consumers. What is the Government’s alternative plan if foreign investors do not support the new nuclear build we need in the UK?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful for the comments from the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. She will know that it is only very recently that it has been possible to invest in new nuclear. The Labour Government she supported had no future new nuclear build programme. She will know from her visits to Sellafield and other nuclear installations that we are taking forward the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee, including at Wylfa in north Wales, to look, where we do have a counterparty with which we can negotiate, at new financial models, and it is right that we should do so. However, as the hon. Lady would expect, that depends on being able to demonstrate value for money for bill payers and taxpayers.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): How likely is it that the Secretary of State will find an alternative developer for a nuclear project in Cumbria? If we do not, how will we generate the power we are missing?

**Greg Clark:** We have a substantial pipeline of new energy projects, as a number of hon. Members have made clear. When it comes to the Moorside site in Cumbria, it was always available to developers to leave it. It will now revert to the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. It will be open to developers to come forward to make proposals. However, whether with nuclear or other sources of clean power, we have a substantial pipeline of new projects coming forward to add to our energy supplies.

**Sir Edward Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): When I was doing the Secretary of State’s job, there were plenty of such setbacks and delays to new nuclear, and they really worried me. I was worried about how we would keep the lights on in the 2020s and 2030s, given that the forecasts were reliant on so much new nuclear, so I looked at contingencies, particularly tidal lagoon power. Will he now reverse his views on tidal lagoon power and look at it quickly, because it can provide the firm reliable power that new nuclear offers and be built much more quickly than a new nuclear power station?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman is correct in noting that the scale of such projects means the companies proposing them need to have a plan that is financeable and, in this case, a source of technology that is available. I repeat what I said at the beginning, which is that the Westinghouse subsidiary of Toshiba went into chapter 11 bankruptcy. On the tidal lagoon project, I am in favour of diverse sources of energy—that is clear—but we have to recognise value for money for taxpayers and consumers. The Swansea tidal lagoon proposal was so far off being able to be financed that it was not value for money for either the taxpayer or bill payers.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that smaller nuclear reactors can be an innovative heart of the mix to provide the country’s future energy needs?

**Greg Clark:** I do indeed. The sector deal to which I referred emphasises the role that small modular reactors can play, including on some sites of decommissioned nuclear power stations. That is an important area for the future.
Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): This decision means that this country will be more dependent on co-operation with France and our European Union partnership. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is important we sustain that?

Greg Clark: I think the hon. Gentleman knows very well that I think we should have a good trading relationship, including in energy, with the rest of the European Union, as we have had in recent years.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The UK is the home of civil nuclear technology. One reason for that is the thousands of very highly skilled apprenticeships the nuclear sector provides. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that that legacy continues, so we can continue to bring through very highly skilled well-paid jobs?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have established the new nuclear college to ensure that the gap in skills, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) referred, can be filled. Apprentices are now being trained for the first time in new nuclear build—an important way our historical strength in new nuclear can be projected forward into the future.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State. What consideration has been made of the wider impact of Toshiba’s decision on the UK nuclear industry and its supply chain? Does Toshiba’s decision put in doubt any other projects coming down the line?

Greg Clark: I was very clear and Toshiba was very clear that there were particular circumstances relating to the financial difficulties of its Westinghouse subsidiary. All these projects are promoted by a particular investor. It has made a decision. It is one that I think was widely expected, given those financial difficulties, but it has no implications for any other promoter.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I understand that the shadow Chancellor said last year that he would end all nuclear power within 100 days of a Labour Government. Given that nuclear energy accounts for about 20% of our energy production, how would they keep the lights on?

Greg Clark: This is the point the trade unions have made. The failure of the Labour party even to support the policy described at the Opposition Dispatch Box by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) concerns investors in new nuclear. In the past, we have been able to establish a common approach in this area so that investors can take a long-term approach with certainty. It would be helpful if we returned to that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his replies so far. Toshiba’s decision to withdraw from the nuclear plant leaves a clear gap in the energy market. It has been stated today that there will be a 7% deficit in energy provision as a result; how will that deficit be filled and by whom?

Greg Clark: There will not be a deficit. We have a substantial—in fact, increasing—pipeline of new investment. One of the features of the energy industry in the UK is that we have not only a pipeline of proposed new nuclear power stations—as I said, they need to meet the value for money threshold—but a substantially increasing volume of investment in renewable energy coming from and reflecting the fact that the price of offshore renewables has halved in the past two years.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The northern powerhouse has just taken a huge dent to its power generation for the future. The Secretary of State knows how important those jobs would be to the north-west of England, including in the Ribble Valley, which I represent. Where Toshiba has failed, will his Department not re-energise its efforts to ensure that the nuclear experts that he relies on can work with embassies and high commissions throughout the world, where some of this expertise lies, to give at least some hope that, where Toshiba has now pulled out, somebody else can come in within a short time?

Greg Clark: My officials and I, and my ministerial team, talk regularly to countries and companies across the world. When I was in Japan last week, I had discussions with Hitachi, which is actively engaged in negotiations on the Wylfa project. Now that Toshiba has taken its decision, for reasons that everyone understands, and I make no criticism of it—it has been very transparent in the reasons for this—that site is now available. Other developers will know that and be able to engage.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Despite losing £100 million on this venture, Toshiba’s share price went up when it pulled out, yet the Secretary of State stands there and tells us that nobody is more committed to nuclear than he is. It is quite obvious that renewables are the future, yet this Government are blocking onshore wind development in Scotland. They are looking at pulling the export tariff, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, they have already pulled CCS funding. When will they provide proper investment in renewables and end this nuclear obsession?

Greg Clark: The first part of the hon. Gentleman’s question makes my point for me. The reason that Toshiba took the decision that it did was to restore robustness to the financing of the company following the chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings that Westinghouse went into. It has grasped that nettle. On the deployment of renewables, he will know that when it comes, for example, to wind in the remote islands of Scotland, I made sure that we were able to take that opportunity, and as a result, investment is going into those communities. [Interruption.] He says that it is small, but the performance of offshore wind is creating jobs all around Scotland and the United Kingdom and is a reflection of the commitment that this Government have given to it.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): This decision is not just about west Cumbria. Springfields nuclear fuel, which is based in my constituency and employs 1,200 people, was hoping to make the nuclear fuel for this plant, as the Secretary of State knows, because he visited it. What assurances can he give that workforce, and what
measures are the Government taking to make sure that Springfields can make nuclear fuel for some of the other plants that he has outlined this afternoon?

**Greg Clark:** Springfields is very successful and has an active programme of supplying the nuclear industry generally. It will be one of the beneficiaries of the fact that we have restarted the build programme for civil nuclear power in this country. My hon. Friend knows that I will work closely with it and him to make sure that it can bid into those projects when they mature.

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** The Secretary of State says that he is talking to other investors in UK nuclear. Will he name which alternative companies he and the Department have approached since Toshiba’s decision, and will he follow up on the exploration by my hon. Friend for Workington (Sue Hayman) of a positive intervention by CGN—China General Nuclear Power Group—to prevent the loss of skills, jobs and equities at Moorside?

**Greg Clark:** We have regular discussions with investors in nuclear. The decision was taken only last Thursday and has some way to go to be implemented, but the hon. Gentleman has my assurance that prospective investors in this site and others will be able to talk, in the first instance, to the NDA, which owns the land, but are also free to discuss these matters with my officials.

**James Heappey (Wells) (Con):** The Secretary of State has championed the development of battery technologies, through the Faraday challenge, and his Department is also looking closely at demand response technologies. Can he say whether these renewables plus storage/flexibility options are quickly replacing the need for centralised thermal plant, and whether we should be looking at those options alongside the new nuclear programme as a priority for our future energy mix?

**Greg Clark:** My view is that we should have a mix of energy sources. It is true that storage, and the progress being made in storage, plus renewables is increasing the possible contribution to our electricity generating system, but, as I say, we are always wise to have a diversity of sources, which is why nuclear has an important role to play.

**Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con):** When NuGen hands back the Moorside site to the NDA in January, will it be the taxpayer who pays for the clean-up, or—I hope—its preparation for a new tenant?

**Greg Clark:** If my hon. Friend visits the Moorside site, he will see that it is pretty clean already. The site was available for development but has not had substantial work on it that would require any remediation.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** As foreign energy companies look to develop new nuclear build around the world, with Her Majesty’s Government’s nuclear sector deal, how attractive is the UK electricity market compared to those of other countries?

**Greg Clark:** It is an attractive market. That is one reason there is interest from several companies in the new nuclear opportunities available. Our market has always been open to overseas investment, and our commitments have attracted interest, not least in the next in the pipeline, which is Hitachi’s proposed investment in Wylfa in north Wales.

**Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con):** Small nuclear reactors have already been mentioned briefly today. May I invite the Secretary of State to go fractionally further than he did in his previous answer and say that when it comes to these smaller, cheaper, more efficient reactors, we should be looking not just at existing nuclear sites, but at other sites being decommissioned in the near future?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the advantages of small modular reactors is that they can be deployed in a wider range of locations than the larger traditional reactors, and that is part of the attraction recognised in the sector deal.

**Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con):** I have considerable sympathy for the Secretary of State’s position in this matter. Does he agree that Toshiba’s much-publicised problems in this area are not of his making and that had Toshiba been willing to keep open its troubled subsidiary on the basis of this one contract, he could have been accused of getting poor value for money for the taxpayer?

**Greg Clark:** It is up to the company, as a commercial investor, to decide its future strategy. It has had a major financial problem as a result of the problems experienced by Westinghouse. We have always been clear that these projects need to be commercially backed, and Toshiba has taken a commercial decision to exit from overseas nuclear. That is a matter for it.
Appointment of Sir Roger Scruton

4.43 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if he will make a statement on the appointment of Sir Roger Scruton as the chair of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): On 3 November I announced that I would convene a Building Better, Building Beautiful commission. The aim of the commission will be to champion beauty in the built environment, as an integral part of the drive to build the homes that our communities need.

Building more homes to address the housing shortage is one of the central challenges that we face as a country. As sources such as the British Social Attitudes Survey show us, most people now accept the need for new homes, but we must ensure that we are building homes in the right places, and homes of high quality, in order to gain the support of local people.

Part of making the housing market work for everyone is ensuring that what we build is built to last, and that it respects the integrity of our existing towns, villages and cities. That will become increasingly important as we look to create new settlements across the country, and invest in the infrastructure and technology needed to ensure that they are thriving and successful places. The commission will make practical recommendations for the Government to consider, to help to ensure that new developments meet the needs and expectations of communities, making them more likely to welcome rather than resist new development.

In the selection of commissioners, my priority is to assemble experts who can provide real expertise and challenge on design quality, and a commitment to building places that communities value and support. Professor Sir Roger Scruton is a global authority on aesthetics, and was knighted for services to philosophy, teaching and public education in 2016. He is one of the country’s leading living philosophers. His commitment to promoting beauty in the built environment is well known, and he has published extensively on the subject. He was an adviser on design to the coalition Government.

As this was an advisory appointment, due diligence checks were carried out and considered prior to Sir Roger Scruton’s selection as unpaid chair. With his experience and commitment to this important agenda, Sir Roger is the right person to chair the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

Andrew Gwynne: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker.

Across the country and in the House, there have been considerable concerns about the appointment of Sir Roger Scruton, especially as his views have become more widely known. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, as part of the appointment process, he was made aware of Sir Roger’s previously expressed views? If he was, what consideration did he give to those views in relation to Sir Roger’s suitability for such an important post? If he was not, is he not just a bit embarrassed that due process was not followed?

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): What are you talking about?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Bacon, you are normally a most civilised and urbane fellow. I cannot imagine what has got into you. I know that you know all about building and houses, and that you can dilate on those matters with great eloquence and at any length specified. We will hear from you ere long—

Mr Bacon: Excellent!

Mr Speaker: Of course it is excellent—excellent for you and, no doubt, excellent for the House, excellent for Norfolk and excellent for the nation—but in the meantime, you should exercise just a degree of patience, and entertain the possibility that someone might express a view, legitimately, that differs from your own.

Andrew Gwynne: Will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Nolan principles apply to this post? Does he consider the views that Sir Roger has expressed to be appropriate for the post of chair of the commission? The primary focus of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission is to seek to address “how new settlements can be developed with greater community consent”.

We support that aim, which is why we have launched our own planning commission, but communities are more than just bricks and mortar and planning processes. They are about people—people from diverse backgrounds—and good planning should foster good community cohesion.

When was the Secretary of State made aware of Sir Roger’s comment that homosexuality is “not normal”, and his comparison of homosexuality to incest? When was he aware that Sir Roger had complained that gay men have an obsession with the young? Will he now apologise to the LGBTQ+ community for appointing a man who holds those views?

When was the Secretary of State made aware of Sir Roger’s links to far-right organisations, and his propagation of their antisemitic conspiracy theories? Was he aware that his new chair spoke out against the disbanding of Vlaams Blok by Belgian courts after it was found to have incited racial discrimination, dismissing it as a conspiracy by the “liberal establishment”? Is that acceptable, in the Secretary of State’s view?

When was the Secretary of State made aware that Sir Roger heaped praise on Hungary’s Viktor Orbán at the height of his truly hateful, state-orchestrated, antisemitic campaign against George Soros, and that he stated in a lecture in Hungary that Jewish intelligentsia “form part of the…Soros empire”?

We also know from reports in the Huffington Post today that Sir Roger Scruton spoke favourably of the National Front, calling it an “egalitarian” movement. Is this acceptable in the Secretary of State’s eyes?

Given this, is the Secretary of State still prepared to speak alongside Sir Roger at an event on Wednesday? If we are going to have a society that welcomes free speech, we should also hold those people to account for what they use this privilege to say. We should consider the views of the people who are left silent by the propagation of hateful rhetoric and views that should have no place in the 21st century, let alone be rewarded by a senior Government appointment.
[Andrew Gwynne]

I want the Secretary of State to confirm to this House that he has confidence in Sir Roger and the views that he holds, so that we can go forwards knowing that this Secretary of State thinks that these views are acceptable for the chair of this commission.

James Brokenshire: I have to say that it saddens me that someone who has done so much to champion freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of thought should be subject to the kind of misinformed, ill-judged and very personal attacks that we have seen over the last few days, some of which, sadly, the hon. Gentleman has just repeated. It is all because Sir Roger has agreed to chair a commission to advise the Government on beauty in the built environment—something that he is eminently qualified to do and that he has done in the past.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of points. I would say to him that Sir Roger Scruton is a leading expert on aesthetics, who was asked to take on an unpaid role as chair of a commission looking into beauty in the built environment. He is one of the most qualified people in this particular field, so I am pleased that he has accepted that role. As a public intellectual of renown and author of over 50 books, as well as countless articles and public lectures, Sir Roger is engaged in a variety of topics, often expressing—yes—strong and controversial views.

Andrew Gwynne: Racist.

James Brokenshire: I am not going to repeat the word that the hon. Gentleman used and read it into the record, but I think he should consider his terms. As Sir Roger has made very clear, he has been offended and hurt by suggestions that he is in any way antisemitic or Islamophobic. Most of what has been reported is highly selective, taken completely out of context and distorted to paint an inaccurate picture. I do not have to agree with Sir Roger to acknowledge this, nor do I have to agree with his views on a number of different issues.

I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect further on some of the points he made. He made some points regarding Prime Minister Orbán’s regime. If, in fact, he read the speech that was given, he would see that Roger Scruton actually took a very firm line against antisemitism—quite the opposite of the situation that has been presented by the hon. Gentleman today. I continue to believe that Sir Roger is the right person to lead this important work.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s point about the need to take this work forward, but I hope that he will recognise the huge contribution that Sir Roger Scruton has made to public debate in so many different ways. This is about freedom of speech and freedom of expression, and although we do not necessarily agree with all that Sir Roger has to say, he is uniquely qualified to provide support to our work on the built environment and aesthetics. We should support him and get on with that job.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Now, Mr Bacon, your moment has arrived.

[Andrew Gwynne]

I want the Secretary of State to confirm to this House that he has confidence in Sir Roger and the views that he holds, so that we can go forwards knowing that this Secretary of State thinks that these views are acceptable for the chair of this commission.

James Brokenshire: I have to say that it saddens me that someone who has done so much to champion freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of thought should be subject to the kind of misinformed, ill-judged and very personal attacks that we have seen over the last few days, some of which, sadly, the hon. Gentleman has just repeated. It is all because Sir Roger has agreed to chair a commission to advise the Government on beauty in the built environment—something that he is eminently qualified to do and that he has done in the past.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of points. I would say to him that Sir Roger Scruton is a leading expert on aesthetics, who was asked to take on an unpaid role as chair of a commission looking into beauty in the built environment. He is one of the most qualified people in this particular field, so I am pleased that he has accepted that role. As a public intellectual of renown and author of over 50 books, as well as countless articles and public lectures, Sir Roger is engaged in a variety of topics, often expressing—yes—strong and controversial views.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Now, Mr Bacon, your moment has arrived.

Mr Bacon: Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. It is a great fact that we live in a free country and speak in a free Parliament where we can say what we want, and it is only for that reason that I defend the right of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) to issue forth the crass and oafish comments that he did, which would be refuted quite easily by reading the books and articles of Sir Roger Scruton.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on appointing Sir Roger Scruton. Does he agree that Sir Roger is eminently qualified to do this, and that it is about time we had somebody speaking up at the top for people who want to take notice of beauty in this country?

James Brokenshire: I profoundly do. The point is that, if we are to gain that consent and the support of the public on ensuring that we have communities that are built to last and that reflect a sense of community at their heart, it is right that we challenge and have this debate. I think that Sir Roger Scruton is uniquely placed to support that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you will not be surprised to hear that I disagree profoundly with many of the views of Sir Roger Scruton, which seem to be designed to bring the bigotry of the 19th century into the 21st. The Secretary of State implied that Sir Roger Scruton has been consistently taken out of context. Does he think that for a professional and public intellectual, as he describes him, to be so generally misrepresented shows a lack of professionalism and expertise, or does he think that offering Sir Roger Scruton a platform on the built environment of the communities of our country is in some way not connected with his views on race, multiculturalism, homophobia, sexual orientation and Islamophobia?

James Brokenshire: We have the right to speak our minds in this House, as the hon. Lady has done, and my respect for the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, even if I may disagree with his views, ensures that this place is the place that it is. We live in a world where people communicate in 140 characters. We are talking about someone who delivers lectures and has written extensively in many different books and some controversial articles. It is important to see that context. Sir Roger has accepted in the past that he has got it wrong—for example, he acknowledged in 2010 that he had changed his position on homophobia and was wrong. It is part of that public debate that leading intellectuals are entitled to explore ideas and change their minds where necessary.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: What a rich galaxy. I call Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his inspired decision to make beauty an important part of the planning process and his equally inspired decision to appoint Sir Roger Scruton? Sir Roger is a very brave defender of free speech who used to go behind the iron curtain when some people on the other side of this House might have had sympathy, and fellow traveller-ish than they might like now to admit. Any philosopher must be able to discuss issues and is bound to say things in his works that are
controversial, because otherwise, discussion and debate cannot be advanced. That is an inevitable consequence of appointing a philosopher.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a point in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of speech. I point him to an interesting lecture that Sir Roger supported by the Syrian architect and author Marwa al-Sabouni. In the midst of the bombardment of Homs, Marwa emailed Sir Roger about his book on aesthetics and how architectural issues were as relevant there, and she has maintained that contact. That freedom of speech and openness is so important.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I studied art, and I totally agree that beauty and aesthetics are important, but building homes for our diverse communities is not just about beauty; it is about the right homes for them. If these controversial remarks have been made, the Government should think twice. They seem to be making a habit of appointing people who are not appropriate for Government advisory roles. Does the Secretary of State agree that the vetting process should be more transparent, to guarantee public faith in such public advisory roles?

James Brokenshire: All I would say to the hon. Lady—I appreciate that she might not have been in the House at the time—is that Sir Roger previously served as an adviser to the coalition Government on issues of design, with both Conservative and Liberal Democrat Ministers. He has served before, and I think it is appropriate for him to provide that support again.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Is not the only truly illiberal thing to use student union smear tactics to deliberately attack a distinguished philosopher who has written hundreds of thousands of words and do what the Opposition spokesman has done today, which is to take one sentence and then claim that the philosopher is antisemitic? We should read the rest of the sentence, in which this philosopher says:

“People in these networks include many who are rightly suspicious of nationalism, regard nationalism as the major cause of the tragedy of Central Europe”.

Here is a man who has defended George Soros. Why are the Opposition stooping so low as to do this? Why can they not defend freedom of speech?

James Brokenshire: I certainly cannot answer for the Opposition in relation to this. All I would say is that Sir Roger is a distinguished philosopher. He is a distinguished author on aesthetics—I think uniquely qualified to support our work in designing better, more beautiful communities. Therefore, I look forward to working with him and getting on with that important work.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): This is not about freedom of speech; it is about whether someone is suitable to be appointed to public office who holds extreme views. There is a difference between dealing with controversial issues and expressing specific views on issues such as Islamophobia, antisemitism and racism in general, and links with right-wing organisations. Did the Secretary of State satisfy himself that those views had never been expressed—those links did not exist—before he made this appointment?

James Brokenshire: Again, I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has taken the view that he has. I remind him that Sir Roger was obviously knighted, back in 2016, for his eminent work and his eminent service. Indeed, he served the coalition Government before, and I believe that he remains the right person to lead the work of this commission. It saddens me that his views have been so misrepresented and that his character has been smeared.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Anyone who has taken the trouble to study any of the 70-odd books on the subject which Sir Roger has written, or read his extensive lectures and articles, will know that, quite contrary to how he is being painted by the Opposition, he is one of the most compassionate and even-handed men that I have ever met. He is my constituent and a good friend, and I know his works extraordinarily well. He is nothing like an antisemite, nor an Islamophobe. Nothing could be further from the truth, and it is an outrage to describe him as such.

Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State not agree that someone who has written so well on the aesthetics of architecture—that is one book, and the classical vernacular another—is the most ideal person there could possibly be for this appointment? Rather than traducing him, which is what Opposition Members are doing for their own purposes, we should be congratulating my right hon. Friend on making an outstandingly good appointment.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): The Opposition never raised a peep when Sir Roger Scruton was appointed as an adviser, nor indeed when he got his knighthood, but they learned from the bully-boy smear tactics that ousted my good friend Toby Young that this kind of smear campaign works. How much more impressive it would be if the Opposition shared my concern about Sir Roger Scruton’s appointment, which is that I do not want him to lead a commission that simply advocates for neo-Georgian pastiche as a definition of beauty. I hope that the commission will include contemporary architects, women and people with BAME backgrounds as well. As far as Sir Roger’s character is concerned, and his views, it is impeccable; he just has a slightly dodgy neo-Georgian pastiche thing going on.

James Brokenshire: I note my right hon. Friend’s personal thoughts on aesthetics. I certainly will be looking carefully at further appointments to the commission, because it is important that we have a good reflection of views there so that we are challenging, thinking and making the case for building beautiful places that are designed to last and to reflect a sense of community and identity with the places in which we live and of which we should be proud.
Mr Speaker: The Clerk at the Table advises me that I am under no obligation to say anything about Sir Roger, because of course one meets all sorts of people in the course of one’s work and one’s life, but in the light of what the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) have just said, I simply inform the House that I have of course met Roger Scruton many times over the years. I express no view about the appointment—that is not for me to do—but I did read his book “The Meaning of Conservatism” in 1982 and I have read many of his articles over the years, and I simply took the view that this issue should be aired in the Chamber. That is what is happening, and Members are very properly expressing their views on the subject.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that Sir Roger Scruton is respected throughout the world, not necessarily because of all his opinions but because he is a profound and distinguished thinker? Will my right hon. Friend accept my congratulations on his appointment?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) was here earlier, and that I just failed to notice his presence.

Mr Hayes: I am extremely grateful, Mr Speaker. As has already been said, Sir Roger Scruton is an extremely distinguished academic with a long pedigree in these subjects. He has made the case—in direct contrast to that made by my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—for a gentle, generous and harmonious built environment, and it does the Secretary of State great credit that he has appointed Sir Roger as chair of this commission. As you have implied, Mr Speaker—although not said, because you would never breach the proper terms of your office—Roger Scruton will bring a lively, imaginative, well-researched report that will inform all of our thinking, and my hon. Friend is giving to the work of the commission. I do not comment on my right hon. Friend’s last point, because I want the commission to come to some of those conclusions, but I know that he is a passionate advocate of this debate and that he has shown himself to be so on previous occasions. His comments on the contribution that Sir Roger will make are well made, as his comments always are.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Sir Roger Scruton has shown true courage and humanity through some of his journeys, particularly to the east, and that his writings and speeches are actually pretty good—

Sir Edward Leigh: They are better than yours, Bob, anyway!

Bob Stewart: I have to say that my hon. Friend is absolutely right: they are better than mine. But I will finish my question. Does the Secretary of State agree that Sir Roger Scruton continues to have massive respect for all sectors of our society?

James Brokenshire: Sir Roger is a leading philosopher, and his extensive work clearly provokes responses and debate, as it is intended to do. However, my focus is on the core skills that he brings to his work on beauty in the built environment, which is why he is so well placed to do this work.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that, like me, the Secretary of State noted the contrast between the claims of widespread outrage from the shadow Secretary of State and the fact of the virtually deserted Labour Benches behind him when he made those claims. Does my right hon. Friend agree that many of those accusations are easily refuted by actually reading what Sir Roger Scruton has written and said, rather than by selectively quoting him?

James Brokenshire: I agree with what my hon. Friend has said. Many of the allegations, claims and smears have been highly selective and taken out of context. I would certainly encourage people to read all the articles that they have sought to point at, and they will see that their claims are misjudged.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): If the qualification for such an appointment is that someone should not have said anything offensive or controversial to anyone during their life, how many Members of the House—with the exception of course of you, Mr Speaker—does my right hon. Friend think would qualify?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman’s generosity of spirit knows no bounds.

James Brokenshire: The short answer is probably very few, which is the point my hon. Friend is making. We need people who are prepared to come forward to advise Government and provide support. It is important that we continue to attract skilled, talented people to do that, and the Government will continue to champion freedom of expression and speech.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the Government on attracting a world-leading expert in architectural aesthetics to this position, and I thank Sir Roger for accepting unpaid public service. Will the Secretary of State join me in deploring the Opposition’s tactics which seem to be based on soundbite misquotations generated on social media?

James Brokenshire: As I said in my initial response, this has been misjudged. Professor Sir Roger Scruton is one of the most qualified people in this field to do this job, and that is why I am so grateful that he has said yes. I look forward to working with him.
Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have certified clause 3 of the Bill as relating exclusively to England, Wales and Northern Ireland on matters within devolved legislative competence.

I inform the House, moreover, that I have selected the amendment in the name of the official Opposition.

5.16 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

When our party first came to office after the great crash, after the years of borrow and spend, our country was close to the abyss. We inherited then the greatest deficit in our peacetime history, a deficit of a magnitude that posed a real and present danger to every one of us, to every man, woman and child in our country and, indeed, to generations yet to come.

This was a deficit greater even than that created by another profligate Labour Government decades before that party reduced our country to scampering cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund for a bail-out, because they had brought us to the point of bankruptcy. It is the Conservative party that has once again—just as we did then—brought our country back from the brink and into better times.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mel Stride: I will make a little progress.

What does this history teach us? Is it that that Marxism provides the answers, as the Labour leadership would have us believe; that fomenting the overthrow of capitalism, as the shadow Chancellor put it, can lead to prosperity; or that high taxation, nationalisation, the blatant sequestration of private capital and borrowing on a scale hitherto unimagined might provide us with the answers or some easy way out? No, the lesson is rather more prosaic but, none the less, noble: that living within our means matters; that those who work hard for their money should get to keep more of it; that the taxman should be held back from the pay packets of those who create and strive; that those parts of our country that have, for too long, felt neglected and left behind should once again be included and heard; and that economies, our communities and our very liberty thrive if we are freed from the burdens of the excessive state interference advocated by the Labour party.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): My right hon. Friend may not have read “Economics for the Many” by the shadow Chancellor, but he will not be surprised to learn that in that book the shadow Chancellor says that the fact that Labour’s figures do not add up is “largely irrelevant.” Does he agree that that shows a shocking disregard for the economic future of our great country?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Of course, it is easy to make pledges when in opposition. Indeed, in the run-up to the last general election the Leader of the Opposition appeared to pledge the abolition of student fees, only to discover that the measure would cost around £100 billion and is totally unaffordable.
Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm the total cost to the Exchequer of corporate tax reliefs in the last financial year?

Mel Stride: What I can confirm to the House is that in reducing corporation tax from 28% to 19% since 2010, we have increased the yield from corporations, not just by a few per cent. but by 50% over that period. We are now talking about taxation, so let us ask: what is Labour’s plan? It is to put taxes up to 26% for large companies and to 21% for small businesses, which would be a full 50% increase in tax bills for large companies and a 25% increase in tax bills for smaller companies.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point. Does it not underline the fact that if we cut the rate, we up the take? Does it not also show that Labour’s plans would result in reduced revenues, meaning more spending, more borrowing and more debt, which would take us back to the brink once again?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right; there is no doubt that if you keep on putting up taxes, as Labour says it will do and would be forced to do if, heaven forbid, it was ever to form a future Government, because its numbers do not add up, you end up killing the goose that lays the golden egg.

Sir Edward Leigh: My right hon. Friend is an excellent Minister, knocking on the door of the Cabinet, so I am sure he will agree with everything—[Interruption.] I know he is one of us, too. Is he slightly concerned that he is committed, as I am and those on our Benches are, to reducing government debt?

Mel Stride: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are indeed reducing government debt. The Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast that in each year of the coming period we will be reducing debt as a percentage of GDP. We have of course met our two intermediate targets a full three years early. As a fellow traveller in the Conservative cause, can he convince me that he is committed, as I am and those on our Benches are, to reducing government debt?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady will know that the deficit was up at about 10%—£150 billion a year—at the time we inherited the mess that her party left us with. That deficit has now reduced by a full 80%, to below 2% of GDP, and will go down further as we move forward. Now, let me make some progress.

As I was saying, these are the economic facts of life and, as a great lady once said: “The facts of life are conservative.”

Under this Conservative Government, sound finances are being restored. The future is brighter, bringing with it our increased commitment to our public services, most notably to our highest priority of all, our national health service. Thanks to the commitment of this Government and the hard work of the British people, we are now entering a new era. The deficit is fading, real wages are rising, the debt is declining and better times are returning. We now have a near record level of employment, with unemployment at a 40-year low, and we have halved youth unemployment since 2010. Central to this progress is my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s Budget and this Bill.

This Bill introduces a tax cut for 32 million people, through bringing forward by a year our manifesto commitment to increase the personal allowance to £12,500 and the higher rate threshold to £50,000.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that this means there will be a tax cut for the lowest earners in our society?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; a large proportion of the tax cut that has been delivered is in the form of a significant increase in the personal allowance—that amount someone can earn before they pay any tax—and that of course has benefited the low paid very significantly and will continue to do so.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister also confirm that this Government are raising the living wage—the national living wage—and that that really is giving people more money? Although that might be difficult for businesses, it is really beneficial for our constituents.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend characteristically makes an important and insightful point. The national living wage, which this Government brought into being, was raised by 4.4% last year and will be raised by a full 4.9% in the coming year. That is well ahead of inflation, which is why in respect of net income those in the lower deciles of the income distribution have benefited disproportionately compared with those at the top end. I remind the House that the wealthiest 1% pay some 28% of all income tax that the Exchequer receives.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Perhaps I can amplify the Financial Secretary’s point about the minimum wage. Since 2010, the national minimum wage, or living wage, has gone up by 38%. When that is combined with the increase in the personal allowance, somebody who works full time on the minimum wage is 44% better off post tax, and inflation over that period was around 25%. Is that not delivering for those on the lowest incomes?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Labour party will tax and tax, borrow and borrow and spend and spend. The Conservative party is reducing the tax burden. Collectively, we have now taken more than 4 million people out of tax altogether, which has disproportionately helped those on lower incomes.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In the third quarter, the UK rate of growth was three times the rate of growth in the eurozone. Is that the wonders of the Brexit vote, or something else?
Mel Stride: That is the wonders of the management and proper stewardship of the economy. It is about taking a balanced approach to our economy, which is getting the debt and the deficit down and restoring our country’s reputation for financial stability and confidence. That is now coming through to the point where we can start to take away some of the pressures of tax and of public expenditure as we move forward to more positive times.

Charlie Elphicke: Does that not underline the fact that we can have strong public services and strong investment in the NHS only if we have a strong economy? It is because of the difficult decisions that the Government have taken over the past few years that the economy and the job market are so strong that we are able to make the investment in the NHS that the Labour party would not have been able to make.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Let us take employment: in this country we have a near record level of employment, we have a near record number of women employed, and we have the lowest level of unemployment since the 1970s. What is Labour’s record? Every single Labour Government in history have left office with unemployment higher than when they started. That is a simple fact. [Interruption.] It may be an inconvenient one, but it is a simple fact none the less.

The tax cut in the Bill is worth £9.5 billion. That means more money in people’s pockets. Since 2015, some 1.7 million more people have been taken out of tax altogether. The saving to the average taxpayer has been more than £1,200 since 2010.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What the Financial Secretary has neglected to mention but the Treasury Committee has heard clearly is that in respect of the long-run impact of the tax and benefit changes under this Government since 2015 alone—putting the coalition to one side—it is clear that their successive policies have left the wealthy better off and the very poorest worse off. That is deeply regressive and unjustifiable and it is why the Bill should not be supported.

Mel Stride: Hopefully, the hon. Gentleman will welcome the announcement that the Chancellor made in the Budget that we will provide a £1,000 uplift to the universal credit work allowance, which will be worth, when we reach full roll-out, a total of £630 million for 2.4 million recipients of that benefit.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Financial Secretary agree that were we to go back to the situation in 2010, when people had to start to pay tax after their first £6,750-odd, that would mean that ordinary, hard-working taxpayers would have to pay an additional £1,000 in tax and would therefore have less money to meet their day-to-day priorities?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right. The problem with Labour’s approach to taxation, and to personal taxation in particular, is that it is a huge discouragement to going out and creating wealth and jobs and the kind of economy that supports the vital public services that Members from all parties wish to see prosper.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, for somebody on the minimum wage, if we combine the increases in the national living wage with the increased personal tax threshold, somebody in full-time work is £3,955 a year better off in cash terms than in 2010?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend, as usual, makes a very significant point, which is that by increasing the national living wage by, as I said earlier, 4.4% last year, and by 4.9% coming up in April next year, and by raising that personal allowance to take more and more people out of tax altogether, we are supporting the lowest paid in our country.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, as well as taking people out of tax, with a whole raft of policies this Government are helping wages increase? In Redditch, for example, there has been a 35% increase in median weekly payments to full-time employees, which means that Redditch workers have more money in their pockets.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right. For the past six months, we have seen rising real wages, and the latest data show that they have been rising faster than at any time in the past 10 years, so we are the party that is fixing the economy and improving living standards.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that abolishment of certain restrictions in the labour market, such as payment between assignment contracts, would also increase people’s wages? Will he be making a statement on the Taylor review and its contribution to this debate?

Mel Stride: This debate is not the place to make pronouncements about the Taylor review. The Government are considering the Taylor review and the way in which people are working. There are a number of aspects in the Budget that relate to the taxation elements of the way that people work, but we will come back in the fullness of time with a full response to the Taylor review.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Just on wages, there was a lack of clarity in the Budget in relation to the public sector pay cap. Can the Minister confirm that every Department is budgeting for 1.5% this year?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have made, within this year, more finance available to various Departments, and the Chancellor was very clear about that in the Budget. He was equally clear that there will be a number of decisions to be made in the spending review next year relating to all the Departments across Government.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am sorry to burst the Minister’s balloon, but if things are as rosy as he says, why is the UK economy not only at the bottom of the G7 for growth forecasts, but at the bottom of all EU countries for projected growth?
Mel Stride: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I do not think that we are at the bottom of the G7 growth table at this precise moment—I think that we are some way off the bottom. He mentioned the important element of growth, and the forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility is that our economy will continue to grow for the next five years and, of course, we come into this period on the back of five years of continuous growth.

Charlie Elphicke rose—

Mel Stride: If there are no other interventions, I will take one from my hon. Friend. For the third time.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the Minister for my hat trick of interventions and for being so generous. I was looking at the amendment in the name of the Scottish National party in relation to VAT and the policing situation in Scotland. Can he confirm to the House that this VAT muck-up is entirely the responsibility and fault of the SNP? It should take responsibility and apologise for it.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right: the Scottish National party will know that when it took the decision to reorganise fire and police in Scotland, it was fully aware and cognisant of the fact that that would mean that VAT was not recoverable. It really is thanks to the Members on the Conservative Benches who represent Scottish constituencies who have made the case so strongly to the Treasury that we were able to change that situation going forward. Perhaps I may now be able strongly to the Treasury that we were able to change that VAT was not recoverable. It really is thanks to the Members on the Conservative Benches who represent Scottish constituencies who have made the case so strongly to the Treasury that we were able to change that situation going forward. Perhaps I may now be able to make a little progress.

We have, of course, also announced that we are freezing fuel duty for a ninth year in succession and increasing the living wage by 4.9% from April. In this Bill, we deliver a freeze on the duty on beer and spirits, keeping living costs down and supporting our pubs. Our freezing duty on spirits comes as a direct consequence of Conservative Members representing their constituency and the forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility is that our economy will continue to grow for the next five years and, of course, we come into this period on the back of five years of continuous growth.

For every Member of this House, the high street lies right at the heart of the communities that we serve. High streets hold within them the very essence of the best of the human spirit—community, creativity, individuality and a collective purpose. They are the places we come together to work, to shop, to socialise, to support, to celebrate, and to invent and create, and this Government wish to see them thrive. That is why we have announced a two-year reduction in business rates of one third for smaller retailers, meaning that up to 90% of high street retailers will benefit. It is also why, in this Bill, we will legislate to allow for the further reduction of corporation tax from 19% to 17% in 2020, helping businesses both large and small. As tax rates have declined—as we have discussed—the corporation tax yield has increased by 50% since 2010. Backing our high streets means backing Britain, and this Government will play their part in this great endeavour.

This Bill will support businesses through the introduction of key allowances and enhancements to important tax reliefs. The structures and buildings allowance will provide a vital tax break for those businesses investing in new commercial property. The annual investment allowance will be increased from £200,000 to £1 million from next year, ensuring that companies have a critical additional incentive to invest.

For businesses concerned with deep-sea oil extraction, we will allow for the transfer of their historical tax history, ensuring that jobs, expertise and businesses involved in the North sea are preserved—a measure that the shadow Treasury Minister, the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), described as “corporate welfare” and said should be voted down. That position should be evidence enough that Labour has truly given up on Scotland, something that the Conservative and Unionist party will never do. On the Opposition Benches we have Labour Members who have given up on hard-working people, SNP Members who have given up on our precious Union, and Liberal Democrat Members who have just given up.

This Bill is also about fairness. It introduces a number of important measures that will further clamp down on tax avoidance and evasion. The House will know that this Government have an outstanding record with regard to the collection of tax. We have one of the lowest tax gaps in the world—far lower than was the case under Labour. In fact, the additional revenue raised by having our tax gap at its current level, compared with that in 2005-06 under the last Labour Government, is enough to pay for every policeman and policewoman in England and Wales.

Collecting tax also matters because where taxation goes uncollected, others who do the right thing are required to pay still more, our vital public services go without, or we have to increase borrowing and the burden is passed on to our children. Tax avoiders, whether the largest corporates or the wealthiest best-advised individuals, diminish us all. This Government will continue to clamp down on avoidance, evasion and non-compliance. Specifically, this Bill brings in measures further to address corporate profit fragmentation, whereby companies reduce their tax burden by artificially shifting around their revenues. In the Bill, we will ensure that non-residents pay tax on the capital gains they make on UK commercial property. The Bill also strengthens our diverted profits tax, which has already brought in and protected £700 million since 2015.
This House will know that we have announced a digital services tax, so that large multinational businesses such as search engines, social media platforms and online marketplaces pay their fair share in tax—right here in the United Kingdom.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I want to ask the Minister a technical question. Given that the digital companies’ turnover and, indeed, profits are substantial, why have the Government been so modest in seeking to achieve only a £400 million tax take from those companies?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the scope of this tax is very clearly targeted on businesses that make substantial value in the United Kingdom as a consequence of the interaction of UK users and the digital platforms they trade across. He will know that there is a small number—relative to the size of the UK economy—of important businesses that are therefore within the scope of the measure. A figure of 2% is very much in line with the kind of figures that the EU was looking at or is continuing to look at—[Interruption.]

From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) is talking about 3%, but she is not actually comparing like with like, because different revenues would be in scope under the two different approaches. The short answer is that this has to be proportionate: it is about levelling the playing field. Along with this particular measure, we have also announced that, for our high streets, we will be reducing business rates by a full one third for 90% of smaller retailers.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that the growing tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the UK is in fact a tax on aspiration and that it discourages higher earners from wanting to work north of the border?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right. If we look at some of the relieving measures on tax that have been provided to Scottish taxpayers, we can see that they come by way of the increases in the personal allowance that this UK Government have made. He is absolutely right to highlight the fact that Scotland is becoming more of a high tax jurisdiction.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Minister’s colleagues in the Scottish Parliament stand up week in and week out to ask for more money for public services, so if the Conservatives will not put up tax, where does the money come from or do they cut services?

Mel Stride: I will tell the hon. Gentleman where some of the money comes from. I will tell him where £700 million has just come from, and that is the Barnett consequentials following from the recent Budget.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): If the Minister is serious about introducing a digital services tax, why did he not just introduce it overnight? When we look at the Red Book, we see it says that the income and the delivery of this policy are both high risk. If he is serious about taxing the digital giants that are offshoring their money, why is he giving them a couple of years to make provision elsewhere?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can we not have these conversations across the Chamber at the other end of the Chamber? It really is distracting.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady will know that we are a first mover: we are one of the first countries in the world to take this approach. She will also know that this is a complicated tax and a tax that we absolutely have to get right. I have already spoken about the restricted scope of this tax. We want to make absolutely certain that it works and that it does not discourage technology companies from coming to this country, as they do in their droves under the economic policies of this Government.

Vicky Ford: Given that digital companies know no borders, does the Minister agree that, while we take this first step to introduce taxes on international digital companies, it is important to continue to work with our neighbours and others across the world on an international effort to do so?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is totally right. We have been in the vanguard of efforts conducted through the European Union, the OECD and the G20 to come up with a multilateral approach on this matter. That is the preferred option of the Government, and rightly so, because it obviates the problems that one would otherwise have with aspects of double taxation. It is helpful if we all move together, and that is still our aspiration, but we have said that if we do not get that multilateral agreement within the next year or so, we will move ahead with our measure.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Financial Secretary may be going to touch on this, but I will ask him the question anyway. He has not said much about investment in climate change technology. There is a lot of concern among scientists about the effect of climate change. Can he give us any indication of how the Government are investing in this technology?

Mel Stride: We are investing hugely, and the evidence is there that we are succeeding. We have had a 43% reduction in carbon emissions since 1990. We are still pursuing, committed to and confident that we will meet our 80% reduction target by 2050. There are measures in the Bill, for example, to provide a tax relief for those who charge their cars through the businesses for which they work. We will continue to be very forward-leaning on the issue of the environment.

Mary Creagh: On that point, the Government’s failure to introduce a latte levy on single-use disposable coffee cups and bottles or to introduce a tax on virgin plastic until 2022 means that 700,000 tonnes of plastic packaging will be thrown away before 2022. Is that what the Financial Secretary means by making sure that the polluter pays in tackling climate change?

Mel Stride: What I mean by our environmental credentials is that there is a tax on the amount of packaging that contains recyclable plastics. We see that not only as informing what we will subsequently do but as helping to change behaviour, much as the sugar levy changed
behaviour in the sugar-based drinks sector. We have a very strong record in this area. We have already done a number of things in the public health area, and we will also make progress on the environment.

Rebecca Pow: On that point, I was pleased to see in the Budget that there is money for the planting of millions of trees. That will have a huge impact not only on ameliorating the effects of flooding and on health and wellbeing, but in terms of the carbon that those trees will take in, which will affect climate change.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) asked a very straightforward question as a solution to the future funding of adult social care?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman mentions the reasoned amendment, which refers to the long-term funding of adult social care. Two Select Committees, the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, recommended a social insurance system in their inquiry’s report. Is he willing to support that cross-party recommendation as a solution to the future funding of adult social care?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman needs to speak to his own Government about cross-party support. My party cannot discuss these issues in this Chamber, let alone outside it. He would be better off engaging with his own Government on these matters.

What we have in the Budget is more spent on potholes than on our schools, not a penny more for everyday policing or fire services and nothing to begin to unravel the 40% budget cuts that have taken place across local authorities.

We have been asked to scrutinise a Finance Bill under the most difficult circumstances the Government could create, short of barring the Opposition from actually attending the House. The timetable set for the Bill meant we were expected to table amendments on Second Reading before the Bill had even been published—an abuse of power. To add insult to injury, printed copies of the explanatory notes to the Bill only arrived in the Vote Office earlier today. How busy Members are expected to provide proper scrutiny under these conditions is beyond me. It is an abuse of power. Worse still, the Government’s refusal to table an amendment to the law for the third Finance Bill in a row means that we will be unable to meaningfully amend this proposed legislation following Second Reading. As I said in my speech on the Budget resolutions, that is unprecedented. It is another abuse of power.

Last week, the President of the United States fired his Attorney General to undermine an investigation against him. Mr Trump also barred a journalist asking legitimate questions from the White House. Perhaps he gave the Prime Minister the odd tip on how to side-step conventions and constitutional process. Stitching up Committees with a false majority, obstructing scrutiny of the Finance Bill and giving a £1 billion bung to a minority party to keep the Prime Minister’s Government alive are further abuses of power. In any other country, we would use a word for this behaviour: malfeasance, plain and simple.

This is a desperate state of affairs, especially given how much the Bill is in need of change. The Government’s policies announced in the Budget fail to tackle a single one of the great challenges now facing this country after eight years of austerity. Most notably, this Bill of broken promises fails to end austerity, as the Prime Minister said it would during her conference speech—once she had finished gyrating. As our reasoned amendment points out, this promise has been broken: £4 billion of Tory social security cuts are still on their way. Only half the money cut from universal credit work allowances was returned to the programme. There was nothing on the social security freeze or the two-child limit.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton has asked a very straightforward question as a solution to the future funding of adult social care?
question, and I am going to give the hon. Gentleman another chance to answer it. Will he, as suggested by my hon. Friend, engage in cross-party support—yes or no?

**Peter Dowd:** It is not in the Finance Bill. Frankly, the hon. Gentleman should worry more about the 8% cut to per pupil school funding in his constituency than trying to get me to answer questions that the Government should be answering.

**Vicky Ford:** On police funding, when the Government proposed hundreds of millions of pounds of additional funding for the police by raising the police precept, why did the Labour party vote against it? [Interruption]

**Peter Dowd:** From a sedentary position my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) says that one in four policemen have gone from his constituency. That is similar to what has happened in my constituency and, I suspect, in the hon. Lady’s constituency. There is not one penny more of day-to-day spending in the Budget. She should be asking her Government why the police are still being underfunded.

**Ruth George:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the huge rise in council tax for council tax payers on every level of income is a highly regressive form of tax? In my Derbyshire constituency, people are having to pay more council tax for fewer police.

**Peter Dowd:** “Regressive” and “Conservative Government” go in the same sentence pretty easily.

The Budget does not move us towards parity for mental health services. It does nothing to end the crisis in social care, to which the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) referred, or in children’s services. It gets worse as the days go on. The Budget was a continuation of austerity under anyone’s definition, and the Bill is a written testament to that broken promise.

**Charlie Elphicke:** As ever, the hon. Gentleman is very passionate. May I just take him back to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)? Will he support that generous and very sensible proposal? Does he think that that is the right way to go about things?

**Peter Dowd:** Look, we are always prepared to look at any idea, but we are trying to deal with the problem today. We are trying to deal now with the hundreds of thousands of elderly people who are not getting the service they are entitled to.

**Alex Chalk:** Back in 2010, at the height of the crisis the hon. Gentleman’s party left us with, it was a Labour Chancellor, Alistair Darling, who said that Labour would close the deficit by 2020. That will not now happen until 2025. How can the hon. Gentleman credibly suggest that this is an austerity Budget?

**Peter Dowd:** That is remarkable coming from an hon. Member who is a member of the party that promised us all that the deficit would be gone by 2015.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** The Government have apparently suggested that we should have a cross-party talk to resolve the issue of social care. They were offered that chance by the Labour Government before the 2010 election and they turned that opportunity down. Let us set the record straight. Tory Members talk about Labour Governments leaving office with high unemployment, but the Major Government left 3 million people unemployed. We introduced the minimum wage, and they said it would lead to 3 million people unemployed.

**Peter Dowd:** National living wage—the clue is in the title—but what the Government have proposed is not a living wage.

The Chancellor did not use the phrase “climate change” once during his hour-long speech—it felt longer than an hour. I’ll grant you that—despite the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, which warned that we only have 12 years to avert climate catastrophe. The Government cling to their woeful plastic straws initiative, but the only measure in the Bill addressed to the 100 corporations that produce 71% of our global emissions was yet another tax break. That is the sort of stuff that the Government should be tackling. This is for the oil industry. The Government have really got to get to grips with its approach to climate change. This oversight is catastrophic. History will remember the Government’s failure to tackle the greatest threat to humanity—that does not overstate it.

Meanwhile, the vulnerable suffer. The Government reneged on their promise to tackle the social devastation wreaked on our communities by fixed odds betting terminals, causing the resignation of yet another Minister. It has since become apparent that they reneged after lobbying by the gambling industry, in spite of the known link between these machines and people taking their own life. Here we have it: the Chancellor of big business pays little regard to the tragedy of lives lost to this awful addiction, as long as the gambling industry can keep making a return and continue its donations to the Conservative party—a fact.

So what remains in the Bill when all these pressing issues have been left out? There has been much discussion about the Government’s change to tax thresholds in clause 5. Let me make our argument clearly: after eight years of austerity, we will not stand in the way of any change that will put additional income into the pockets of low and middle earners, regardless of how that is brought about—[Interruption.] We have said that time after time. However, Labour’s policy remains that we believe we should be taxing the wealthiest more to deliver the end of the austerity that the Tories have failed to provide. We will therefore table an amendment to clause 5 setting out our tax proposals. These proposals would protect everyone earning below £80,000 a year—95% of the population—from any further tax increases, while ensuring that the top 5% of our society pay their fair share. We call on the House to support our amendment in the Committee of the whole House.

**Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con):** Will the hon. Gentleman concede that 1 million people will be lifted out of the higher rate of taxation and that many of them are consultants working in hospitals, GPs, senior police officers and senior council officers? Does he not recognise that that is a good thing?

**Peter Dowd:** The hon. Gentleman really must listen more—[Interruption.] I will send him a signed copy of my speech; he might learn a thing or two.
[Peter Dowd]

We believe in building a coalition of the many—a broad, democratic movement of 95% of the public—to spread prosperity across the furthest reaches of our country. We cannot in good faith increase taxes on those who have struggled for eight long years while the richest continue to accrue even more wealth.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—I was listening. What does he intend to do to individuals earning over £80,000 a year?

Peter Dowd: Actually, we set out our tax policies in “Funding Britain’s Future”, and I will send a signed copy to the hon. Lady for her to have a look at. Perhaps Government Members can have a tutorial with Sir Roger Scruton and tease out some of the issues.

On Brexit, yet again, we have seen the Government using our exit to hand themselves broader powers, indefinitely. This is a continuation of the theme that I described—of a Government’s demand for power, even though they are clueless about how to exercise it.

Charlie Elphicke: The whole House understands that the hon. Gentleman is very enthusiastic about raising the rates of taxes for richer people, but does he not remember that the experience of reducing the top rate of tax from 80% to 60%, and then from 60% to 40%, was that more money was brought into the Treasury on each occasion? Labour’s plans to increase taxes will mean less money for the Treasury and less money for the NHS.

Peter Dowd: International evidence does not show that, but let me give the hon. Gentleman a figure. The top 1% have received an increase in share of total income—from 5.7% in 1990 to 7.8% in 2016-17. That was identified by the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What I do not understand—if the hon. Gentleman really believes this—is why, for 99.3% of the time that the last Labour Government were in power, the top rate of income tax was 40%, whereas for the duration of this Government, it has been either 45% or 50%. Does Labour say one thing in power and a completely different thing in opposition for purely opportunist, party political and vote-winning purposes?

Peter Dowd: A Conservative Member of Parliament talking about opportunism! It is not quite as bad as the Liberal Democrats talking about opportunism. I grant you, but there we are—[Interruption.] I think the hon. Gentleman should worry about working people in his constituency who, overall, are £800 a year worse off. The indecisiveness that I referred to means that the Prime Minister has stood—I suspect that one or two Government Members were here at the time. The Prime Minister has stood staring at the Brexit menu for two years while her Cabinet devours itself in the queue behind her.

Kevin Hollinrake: According to the economist David Smith, if Labour policies at the last election had been implemented, people who were earning between £100,000 and £120,000 a year would have been paying, on that element of their earnings, a marginal rate of taxation of 72%. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that that is a fair burden of taxation on earners at that level?

Peter Dowd: In the context of a fair taxation system, as set out in “Funding Britain’s Future”—which, again, I exhort the hon. Gentleman to look at—we look at everything, and we will look at everything, unlike the Government.

The indecisiveness that I referred to means that the Government have to try to amass as much power as possible so that, if the Prime Minister cannot make her mind up, our hands are tied in a constitutional sense. It seems that, when Tory Brexit theocrats talked about wanting to take back control, they wanted us to give it to them. We cannot allow such a vast power grab to take place from a Government who have shown such disregard for our constitution already.

Turning to another issue, I draw the House’s attention to the measures that are supposed to address tax avoidance—hope springs eternal. Once again, these are simply inadequate. They are a series of half-measures that leave so much room to wriggle, they must have been written by the Prime Minister. The Government promised us a full public register of beneficial owners. Where is it? I have looked through the Bill numerous times—I have to admit, it was painful—and I can see no reference to it. It is yet another broken promise.

We have been waiting for two years for the Government to act to tackle burning injustices, yet they seem more focused on fanning the flames. Again, we find ourselves being forced to debate a Bill that is heavy on rhetoric, as evidenced in the speech from the Minister, and light on content. No wonder the Government will not let us amend it. They are scared that we would put something useful in it and add some policy to the lacuna that is there now.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does my hon. Friend agree that a response to the Taylor review would be the start of something real and possible and the abolition of payment between assignment contracts?

Peter Dowd: I refer my hon. Friend to the response given by the Minister earlier. We are prepared to look at all proposals.

Vicky Ford: The shadow Minister just said that the Bill is light on content, but it is 315 pages long. I have just read his Labour party document “Funding Britain’s Future”, which is eight pages long, three of which are footnotes. What am I missing, sir?

Peter Dowd: What is the hon. Lady missing? A great deal, I would contend.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman talks about the policy on tax collection, so surely he will welcome the Government’s innovative approach to unexplained wealth orders. These measures have already been implemented. They are an innovative approach to capturing people who seek to avoid our tax system, and they are bringing wealth into the Treasury. Surely he can find something to welcome in that.

Peter Dowd: They have been so successful that the Government have only used them once.

Mr Jim Cunningham: The Bill might be thick, but it is low on content when it comes to public sector funding for public sector pay—we notice that that is for the
spending review—and it is very light on content in relation to the Taylor review and people on zero-hours contracts.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend, who is a great advocate for his constituency, is spot on. Some 4.5 million children—7,000 per constituency—are living in poverty in the UK. Conservative Members should concentrate on sorting out that kind of problem. That is what the Government should be focusing on.

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman just talked about spurious rhetoric, but I want to take him back to what he said about climate change, because he completely misses the point. The Government are doing more on climate change than any before them. A great deal of it is being done by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—it is about joined-up thinking. We have the 25-year plan, the Agriculture Bill, the green growth strategy and the electric car strategy, and measures in the Budget draw this together. The plastics tax is one very good example of how seriously we take the issue.

Peter Dowd: Investment in renewables is down. The idea that the Government are green is itself green—it is a pathetic claim.

The Government promised us a public register of beneficial ownership. I have asked before: where is it? It is another broken promise. I call on the House to support the amendment to give the people of the United Kingdom action on the great challenges facing our nation, which the Government appear incapable of addressing and which have been ignored for too long.

I end on the note I started on: the abuse of power. It was once said that:

“Worse than a corrupt government is an incompetent one, not least because having the second characteristic does not exclude the first”.

Given the way the Government have behaved over the ability of Parliament to do its job, that notion is becoming closer and closer as the days progress. It should be deeply worrying to any democrat.

6.12 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

In the third quarter of this year, the United Kingdom economy grew considerably faster than the eurozone economy, which is very welcome. It is a timely reminder that since 2010, under first the coalition and then the Conservative Governments, we have seen conditions created in which there has been rapid jobs growth, a general expansion and improvement in profitability and investment, and some return to the better growth rates we saw before the crash at the end of the last decade.

We also see, however, that in the third quarter the United States economy grew considerably faster than the United Kingdom economy, and the reason is simple. The US has decided on a bold tax reform and reduction programme, which has injected a large amount of extra money into the economy, allowing families and individuals to spend more of their own money without having to give so much to the state, and allowing companies to keep more of their profits. As a result, more American corporations have repatriated their profits to the US, where they then pay the reduced tax rates and either invest that money, give wage rises or better remunerate their shareholders to encourage yet more investment. That model is clearly working. The tax reductions are the main reason the US has experienced much better growth this year than either the EU or the UK.

The Government should not be complacent. While we have so far had a long-lasting and moderate-paced recovery, which is welcome, and a very good jobs recovery, which is extremely welcome, although it gets little credit from the Opposition, policy now is too restrictive. We have an exceptionally tight monetary policy—the tightest of anywhere in the advanced world. We have had two interest rate rises; the ending of all new quantitative easing; the removal of all special facilities from the Bank of England to the clearing banks to lend more money for enterprise and good purposes; much stricter rules to commercial banks that have been very effective in leading to big reductions in new car loans and mortgages for the higher-priced properties; and of course the attack on the buy-to-let sector in the 2016 Budget. This is quite a big monetary tightening.

At the same time, there is still a tough fiscal tightening. What worries me—and clearly the Chancellor, too, given some of the actions in the Budget—is that the fiscal tightening was even tighter this year than was planned. Between the March figures and those in this Budget, an extra £12 billion was taken out of the economy and put into the public sector, mainly through extra tax revenues, but also a bit through the shortfall in the planned spending increases. That is quite a severe extra negative adjustment to impose on an economy that we are already trying to throttle with a very tight monetary policy. I fear that the relatively good growth figures of the third quarter will be slowed by these twin actions.

Now let me praise the Chancellor. He is absolutely right to say that the fiscal squeeze was getting too tight and to take action to try to relax the involuntary fiscal squeeze next year, but he is not doing anything much this year. I would like to see something over the winter as well, because the involuntary tightening is unreasonable. That said, the measures he has introduced to relax the fiscal position a bit are very welcome. With my colleagues on these Benches, I strongly welcome the early fulfilment of the promise on tax thresholds. It was a bold promise, and it is good to see it met, as it is a good way of allowing many more hard-working individuals and families to keep more of the money they earn.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend also recognise that the idea that people on the higher rate of tax are somehow storing their money away in the Cayman Islands is an absolute nonsense. These are hard-working people—often people such as locum GPs and deputy headmasters. Normal working people are being caught in this tax trap.

John Redwood: That is right. Many people who have been relatively successful and got to more senior positions are now being caught by quite penal taxes. I would like to see, in either this or a future Budget, more progressive work done to cut the tax rates to raise more revenue. That has come out very well so far on the Government Benches. We all strongly support what the Government have done on corporation tax rates, which have come down a long way and are coming down further.
That boldness has been rewarded with a 50% increase in revenue—an increase that the Opposition do not want. They want to put the rate back up to avoid that increase in revenue. [Interrupt.] They nod and say it would not happen, but it does happen. It happens every time they get into office: they put the rates up, tax revenue falls, and we have to come in and lower rates again, but we also have the problem of dealing with the extra borrowing.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I cannot wait until half-past nine when I get to wind up the debate. I say again: causation and correlation are not the same thing. Every independent assessment of what has happened to corporation tax over the last few years, such as that by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, very clearly shows that the reductions in corporation tax have been very expensive and cost this country a great deal of revenue.

John Redwood: We disagree.

Let us take another tax where very clearly a lower rate has produced a lot more revenue: the higher rate of income tax. Labour wisely kept the highest rate of income tax at 40% throughout most of its time in government, knowing it was the way to attract people with money into the country, to attract investors and entrepreneurs, and to encourage people to take more risks. It set a more penal rate just as it left office, as a kind of tax trap for the Conservatives. When the Conservative Chancellor eventually summoned up the courage to lower the rate from 50% to 45%, there was a big surge in revenue.

As one of my colleagues has already pointed out, there was an even bigger surge in revenue when a previous Conservative Government cut the rate from 80% in two stages to 40%. The amount of tax went up in cash terms and in real terms, and the amount of tax paid as a proportion of the total by those on the top rate went up. It was a win, win, win. I would urge the Chancellor to reconsider reducing it back down to 40% because he would collect more revenue and provide that stimulus to enterprise.

I hope that the Government will think again about a couple of tax rises that have been deeply damaging to our economy. The first is the rise in car tax, or vehicle excise duty. The graph showing car sales and output in the UK was increasing progressively between the Brexit vote and the spring Budget of 2017, but it then fell very sharply, and we now have a serious problem. The tax attack on diesel cars, allied to the threat of more controls on diesels, has been particularly damaging. Governments of both persuasions have gone out of their way to attract a lot of inward investment, and new investment, in diesel output and diesel vehicles. They encouraged that, only then to kick the props away and make such investment very difficult.

Julian Knight: Germany has started to row back and introduce “clean diesel”. The other issue is stamp duty. The Government have cut it for many people, which is extremely welcome, and I am pleased that they are continuing the trend so that houses can become more affordable for those who do not own them. However, we need to think about people who are trying to buy a different house, perhaps to move up the property ladder in expensive parts of the country; we need to think about the impact of transactions at the dearer end on chains and on people buying cheaper houses; and we need to think about the workloads of removal firms, estate agents, decorators and so forth.

I think that the Government have overdone the tax attack at the top. The market has become ossified, and they must be losing quite a lot of revenue. As the Red Book shows, they are having to scale back the stamp duty revenue forecast, and I am sure that that is to do with the damage that the tax attack has done in relation to the more expensive properties.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Personally, I consider stamp duty to be daylight robbery. The Government do nothing for it; they just take money from people who are trying to get a home.

John Redwood: I agree. I do not think we will reach the happy position that my hon. Friend and I would like to see, with no stamp duty at all, but I think we could make a great deal of progress by introducing a more realistic stamp duty rate so that people could fulfil their dream of moving up in the world on the housing ladder, or go the other way and buy a smaller home or one in a cheaper location. At present, those penal stamp duties are getting in the way of all kinds of mobility and the fulfilment of aspiration. Surely we should be helping people to fulfil their aspirations, and the wish to live in the right home in the right place is an important part of that.

Karen Lee: The right hon. Gentleman has referred to “the right home in the right place”. Does he not agree that some people would be grateful for any home?

John Redwood: We want more housing for more people. There are people who need homes, and I am very much in favour of helping to provide them. The Government have many programmes relating to house building and more affordable housing, and that is all very welcome.

However, we need to continue the progress. We need to look at the defence budget, the social care budget, and the schools budget. Certainly, in both the West Berkshire Council and the Wokingham Borough Council areas—parts of which are in my constituency—we need more for our local schools. They are at the back of the queue for funds nationally, and the amounts that we are receiving are simply not enough to sustain the quality of service that we need to supply.
There is one big issue overhanging this debate that few people ever seem to mention. I would like us to have access to the £39 billion that some people want to spend on the European Union withdrawal agreement. We do not owe that money, and I do not think we will get anything out of a 21-month additional period for an argument with the EU about the future relationship. If we cannot secure a good future relationship by March, I do not think it will be easier to do so once we have given all the money away, and signed and sealed a deal on it.

I urge the Government to regard the £39 billion as something that we Leave voters voted to take back control over, and to spend on our priorities. What a transformation we would see both in our public services and our economy if, instead of signing that money away in a withdrawal agreement in the naive hope that it will produce something better—which it will not—we spent it on our priorities. We could have tax cuts with a tax cost, not just tax cuts to raise more revenue in the instances that I have described; and we could have quite a lot of extra money for our schools, hospitals and defence, and our other priorities, much more quickly. We know we have access to that £39 billion over a two to three-year period, because we know the Chancellor has costed it all and made provision for it. Most of it would be spent during the period, which, over that time, would provide a 2% boost for our GDP. That would be an extremely welcome addition, and it would be rather like what the United States of America is trying to do through easier monetary and fiscal policies than those that we are following.

I want a true end to austerity. I am with the Prime Minister in saying that we must end austerity, because ending it means more money for our schools, hospitals and other priorities. As I have explained, we can afford that, if only we do not keep on giving all this money to rich countries that do not want a free trade agreement with us. However, I also want to end austerity for all the people who work in the private sector, and that is about more tax cuts.

So, Government, well done so far; but be bolder, show more courage, and then you will create a much more prosperous country.

6.26 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is great to be back here, speaking in another Finance Bill debate—especially when we know that yet another is likely to be just around the corner, in March, if there is no-deal Brexit and there then has to be what the Chancellor euphemistically calls “a fiscal event”.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), this Budget was a continuation of austerity. We continue to have the benefits freeze, we continue to have the rape clause, and we continue to have cuts in Government Departments. The Scottish Government fiscal resource block grant allocation will have been cut by 6.9% in real terms between 2010-11 and next year, and the Barnett allocation for health has not been passed on in full, despite repeated assurances from the Government that it would be.

Next week we will get into the nitty-gritty of the Finance Bill. Breaking with the tradition so far in the debate, I am going to talk a lot about the measures that are in the Bill, and about some of the aspects that concern me. I shall talk a fair bit about process as well.

As the hon. Member for Bootle said, there have been real issues in relation to process, in this Bill more than in previous Finance Bills.

Paper copies of the Bill were not made available until Wednesday, when the House was in recess and those of us who do not live in London were mostly not in London. I had to go to the people in the Vote Office and ask them to post a copy to me. They did post it to me, which was terribly kind of them. However, I had already had to ensure that the Scottish National party’s reasoned amendment was tabled before I had seen any copy of the Bill, let alone a paper copy. The process was not fit for purpose. It is not right that we should have to table amendments before seeing a Bill, and I implore the Minister to ensure that it does not happen again. If it does, we will protest even more vociferously.

There are other issues relating to process. The Chartered Institute of Taxation has said:

“Just 37 of the 90 substantive clauses in the Bill, and 12 of the 19 lengthy schedules, were included in the draft bill published for consultation over the summer.”

It is unusual for so few measures to be consulted on, but what is even more unusual is the timescale. The Government are expecting external organisations to digest clauses that they have never seen before and then to comment on them, in advance of the Committee of the whole House, which we expect to be on Monday and Tuesday next week. Having had the Bill in their hands for less than a week and a half, they will be expected to make serious suggestions for improving it. Let us not forget that the purpose of the scrutiny is to try to make the legislation better. In fact, the Government have pointed out that two measures in the Finance Bill exist to correct errors made in previous years. The Government made errors in previous years when there was a more lengthy consultation process for most of the measures, so I contend that there are likely to be even more errors in this Finance Bill, given that it has not had external scrutiny due to tight timescales.

On that point—the Minister probably knows what I am going to say now—we need to have evidence sessions in the Public Bill Committee. If we are not going to have enough time for appropriate scrutiny in writing that is provided to MPs in advance, it is even more important, especially this year, that external organisations give evidence in the Public Bill Committee. I will move an amendment to that effect when we come to the programme motion. Members across the House have voiced support for the Committee taking public evidence. The problems raised by the Government regarding the fact that we will already have had Committee of the whole House by that point are realistic ones when it comes to the measures going before a Committee of the whole House, but we would still benefit from scrutiny of the measures that are going to Public Bill Committee. If the Minister could find a way, through the programme motion, for the Public Bill Committee to begin with an evidence session including organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Association of Accounting Technicians, it would be incredibly appropriate and even more necessary than usual this year.

As is noted in the Opposition amendment, there is no amendment of the law resolution, which means that any amendments to the Budget have to be tight in relation to the Budget resolutions. That means that we table an awful lot of amendments saying, “We’re calling for a
review into this”, and then the Government stand up in the Public Bill Committee and say, “Why would we do a review? You’re only calling for a review. You’re not calling for anything tangible.” But we cannot call for anything tangible because the Government have tied our hands. I have made this point before and I will make it again: the Government must remember that they will not be in government forever. When they are in opposition and the same thing is being done to them, they will be standing up and complaining about it. They have caused this problem and opened these floodgates, and it is really bad for transparency and scrutiny if they keep behaving like this.

Clause 5 is about the personal allowance and the basic rate allowance, and the Government have chosen not to separate out the reserved and devolved matters in this clause. Now, I get that we have not had this devolved situation for particularly long, so this may be an oversight by the Government, but I implore them to ensure that in future years these matters are dealt with in separate clauses. It would be easy for them to do that. Indeed, it would also be easier for Mr Speaker, because he would be able to certify one part as English votes for English laws and not the other part, which is a reserved competency in relation to the personal allowance. This would make scrutiny and read-across better. It would just be a better process of making tax law if these two things were separated out. I ask that these points are taken into account the next time we have a Finance Bill, whether that is in March, October or November next year.

I sit on the European Statutory Instruments Committee, which is currently looking at the proposed negative instruments—it is riveting, honestly. As with lots of the legislation that is coming through just now, the Brexit clauses in the Bill allow the Minister further delegated powers. In fact, one of these clauses allows the Government to set spend for a new tax in relation to current pricing, without saying what that spend would be—I think that is around clause 80. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) talked about taking back control, but parts of this legislation allow the Government more control and more unfettered power. It would actually be more sensible for this House to take decisions over how much spending should be allocated in this regard, rather than giving Ministers more control.

As hon. Members would expect, I am going to mention fixed odds betting terminals. The Government say that they cannot lower the stakes from April next year, rather than next October, will have a clear health impact to lowering the stakes. Making the changes in April, rather than next October, will have a genuine impact on the health of a huge number of individuals.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am very clearly on the record as having supported changing the tariff that people can spend on fixed odds betting terminals from £100 to £2; it is absolutely the right thing to do. Let me be clear that it is quite extraordinary for a Labour Member to stand up and start lecturing the Government on having made an incredibly important and valuable change to legislation that rights the wrong of this fixed odds betting terminals—

Kirsty Blackman: I agree with the hon. Lady. There is a clear health impact to lowering the stakes. Making the changes in April, rather than next October, will have a genuine impact on the health of a huge number of individuals.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Graham, you have been here long enough to know that we have short interventions; you do not need me to tell you that. If you want to speak, I will put you on the list, but we must have short interventions.

Kirsty Blackman: I should say that I am not from the Labour party. The Government’s reasoning for the delay is what concerns me, especially when it is completely the opposite of the reasoning they are using about Brexit, where they are saying, “It’s fine. Everybody has heaps of time to prepare—loads of time.”

I thank the Government for the changes to transferable tax history. They have worked very well with the industry to ensure that late-life oil and gas assets can be exploited for longer. I first raised this issue in March 2016, so I am very glad that the Government are now moving on it. However, this is not the whole picture. It is appreciated that this change has been made, as it will have a small but positive effect. I am pleased that this measure has come through, but we still have not seen the oil and gas sector deal, nor have we seen proper unequivocal support for carbon capture and storage. I want the Government to make louder noises about carbon capture and storage, and they need to after pulling the rug from under the feet of the industry three years ago. They need to be even louder and more vociferous in their support because the industry has been stung. The companies that were keen to take part in carbon capture and storage have been stung by the decisions of the previous Chancellor, so the Government need to be as clear as possible about support for carbon capture, utilisation and storage, which is a real industry for the future.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend correctly said that we have not seen an oil and gas sector deal. Is that not disgraceful considering that the Red Book shows that, over the lifetime of this Parliament, the industry is going to bring in an extra £6 billion of tax revenue. Instead, the Chancellor stood up and bragged that he is holding the tax at the current level for the oil and gas industry, instead of actually working to get an oil and gas sector deal?

Kirsty Blackman: The sooner that deal can be announced and that commitment can be made by the UK Government, the better for the industry. Confidence is still shoogly just now, and although that confidence is rebuilding, we need clear commitments for the industry and the clear support of the UK Government so that the industry feels more secure and takes decisions on investment and exploration. That is why signing a sector deal as soon as possible would be hugely appreciated.
More generally, one of the things that infuriates and frustrates me about this UK Government particularly is that they think that if they stand up and invent a new definition for something, it will immediately become true. They have decided that if they say “living wage” instead of “minimum wage”, people will actually be able to live on it. That is not how it works. People still cannot live on it, even if the Government call it a living wage, and that is especially the case for the under-25s, who are not eligible for the living wage. It does not cost someone who is 24 less to live than someone who is 25. The Government need to get rid of those differential rates.

The UK Government say that they have ended austerity. By anyone else’s definition, they have not ended austerity. Just because they say, “We’ve ended austerity,” it does not mean that they have actually ended austerity. There are still cuts to Government Departments. There is still not enough money for people to live. People still have to rely on benefits. That is not how it works. People still have to rely on benefits. We still have all those issues.

Leo Docherty: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: Not just now. In terms of the economic growth forecasts that the OBR has apparently made—

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: I am not taking any more interventions.

The OBR has made economic growth forecasts on the basis of a smooth and orderly Brexit. It has not made economic growth forecasts on the basis of us crashing out in a no-deal scenario, so its forecasts are only worth anything if the Government can strike a deal, as the Chancellor knows, which is why he has spoken about another fiscal event coming.

Frictionless trade is not frictionless just because the Government call it frictionless. If a good has to be stopped at the border, if somebody has to fill in an additional form or if there is any delay, that is not frictionless trade. Just because the Government say, “This is frictionless trade,” it does not mean that it is actually frictionless trade.

The Government need to improve their processes around the Finance Bill. This year has been the worst in terms of those processes, and they have to improve. The Government could do that by ensuring that we take evidence at the Public Bill Committee.

The Government have to actually do the things they say they are doing. If they say they are going to give Scotland the Barnett consequentials for health, they should give it the Barnett consequentials for health. If they say they are ending austerity, they should end austerity. If they say they are putting in place a living wage, they should put in place a living wage.

Lastly, if the Government are talking about tax cuts, they need to look at the situation in Scotland. The figures I have from the Library say that around half of taxpayers in England pay more than they would if they lived in Scotland, and that half of taxpayers are the people who earn the least, not the most. The UK Government should look at what the Scottish Government are doing and learn some lessons.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We have 29 Members wishing to speak. There is no time limit, but Members should remember that we want to get everybody in.

6.42 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).

I welcome the Bill, which implements a Budget that helps individuals and families in my constituency and across the whole country to keep more of the money they earn and helps the businesses in my constituency and across the rest of the UK to invest and grow. This is a Budget that secures the public finances and helps us to repair the damage caused by the Labour party. More importantly, it helps us to prepare for the challenges ahead. As the fourth industrial revolution accelerates, it is important that we help our start-ups and our scale-ups and our engineers, innovators and entrepreneurs. This Budget does all those things.

Ultimately, this Budget will improve our productivity, so that as we leave the European Union, this country is fit for the future and in the best possible position to seize the opportunities presented by new technologies, new industries and new sectors and to support the entrepreneurs who create so much of the wealth that drives our growth and funds our public services.

This Budget builds on the financial and economic stability that we have built over the past eight years. It is a Budget that builds on rising wages, rising employment, a growing jobs market and the rising productivity that has allowed this country to maintain its top 10 position in the World Economic Forum’s competitiveness index. It is a Budget that allows us to seize on our strengths and improve our productivity as we leave the European Union.

This Budget contains measures that will help individual taxpayers in my Havant constituency. It increases the personal allowance to £12,500, allowing us to meet an important manifesto commitment one year early. It raises the higher rate threshold to £50,000, which helps not only the entrepreneurs and small business owners who are prevalent in my constituency but many of our senior public servants to keep more of the money they earn and have more disposable income, so that they can make choices for their families and their own future. That is important to Government Members at least, so despite the pressure in our public services, I welcome the tax cuts in this Budget.

Alan Brown: The hon. Gentleman mentions entrepreneurs. He will be aware that universal credit ends after one year for self-employed people. Can he tell me how that helps entrepreneurs?

Alan Mak: In 2017, we had a record number of start-ups in this country, with 660,000 new businesses, up from just under 600,000 in 2015. This Budget, along with the package of measures being introduced, helps entrepreneurs across the piece. I look forward to more entrepreneurs starting their own business in this country, as I and other Members have done across the country. The work allowance measure helps those who want to get off benefits and into work, and I welcome it.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Does he agree that the whole point about being an entrepreneur is not to be reliant on benefits, but to invest in a business, grow it and succeed, so that people can stand on their own two feet and support others, including those they employ?
Alan Mak: My hon. Friend makes a characteristically powerful point. I know that he is an entrepreneur who has started his own business, as I have.

Measures such as the cut to corporation tax will make our country even more competitive. When we started cutting corporation tax in 2010, we embarked on a journey that will allow this country to become one of the most competitive in the G20, with the lowest possible rate of corporation tax. I welcome that measure.

Karen Lee: When the hon. Gentleman says, “despite the pressure in our public services,” does that mean he thinks it is acceptable that we have lost 21,000 police staff and so many nurses and that people wait in ambulances outside A&E for four hours or more? Is that acceptable?

Alan Mak: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I actually said that it was despite the pressures on our public finances, rather than our public services. We have to get the balance right between cutting taxes for our hard-working taxpayers and investing in our public services. She will know that the Government have announced an increase of £20 billion a year for our NHS—a step that I welcome—but we can only invest that money in our NHS and our public services if we are creating the wealth in the first place. It is the measures in the Budget, including those that cut corporation tax, that will allow us to generate that wealth. It is the measures we have implemented since 2010 that allow us to cut corporation tax.

Leo Docherty: Does my hon. Friend agree that the slashing by one third of business rates for small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy, is further good news for business and is to be welcomed?

Alan Mak: I welcome my hon. Friend’s intervention. He is absolutely right that small businesses in his Aldershott constituency and in my constituency are the backbone of our economy. We want more of those small businesses. That is why we had a record number of start-ups in 2017, which I very much welcome.

The changes to corporation tax in the Budget will increase the take-up of entrepreneurship, increase entrepreneurs’ ability to start a business and ensure that the marginal rate on them is much lower. We will have the lowest rate of corporation tax in the G20, and we will maintain that ultra-competitive edge as we leave the European Union. The OECD’s evidence suggests that the more we cut corporation tax, the higher the rate of revenue we get for our economy. This is a welcome step that will turbo-charge our economy as we leave the European Union.

Finally, Havant is known for its engineering and manufacturing prowess. Manufacturers such as Dunham-Bush, Lewmar and Kenwood export from Havant to countries all around the world. The reforms to the capital allowance rate and the increase in the annual investment allowance will allow them to buy the machinery, plants and technology they need to expand and grow. I welcome the Bill, because this Budget helps taxpayers to keep more of the money they earn, it helps our businesses to grow and it prepares our country to seize the opportunities of the new technologies of the future.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I am glad to see that those on the Government Benches have stopped making fun of our SNP colleagues’ accents. Of course, as a Londoner, I do not have an accent, do I?

I will address finance for housing in London, where many of the problems we experience are common across the nation, and I will begin by giving a little history. In 1966, leading modern movement architect Richard Seifert completed his iconic Centre Point commercial building on Tottenham Court Road. There were no takers for office space at the asking rate, and Harry Hyams, the developer, refused to lower it. This is an important historical point and it was very much debated at the time. It was empty until 1975—the developer got it wrong.

In an area near Soho where homeless people gather, it was inevitable that the building would be occupied for a period. The charity Centrepoint—ironically named after the building—was set up in a nearby church to tackle the problem of street homeless young people. Recently, a huge redevelopment of this building has been completed, with a change of use to residential.

Centre Point Residences is prime residential property next to a Crossrail station. The conversion is magnificent—if you like that kind of thing. However, it was reported two weeks ago that the developer had been unable to sell half the flats at the price he wanted, so he has taken them off the market completely, saying that he had already covered construction costs and leased the retail spaces at ground level—there was “no point” trying to sell. He got his timing wrong. Half the flats will remain empty long term, and there is no incentive to sell or rent them out.

This is the ultimate irony: homeless people line the streets in their hundreds—many, as we know, are servicemen—and they are ever more visible and desperate as winter approaches. Meanwhile, there are a recorded 20,000 empty homes in dark buildings across the capital, and 15,000 high-end properties on the market, and that does not count those taken off the market. Centre Point Residences is a monument to developer greed, and its empty homes distort the market further. It is obscene.

Meanwhile, the chief executive of Persimmon has been able to make a hasty retreat from his job to save the company embarrassment, with a £75 million bonus. Persimmon—which has a very mixed reputation, to put it politely—benefits hugely from Government grants via Help to Buy—another alarming example of the trickle-up economy.

What has the Chancellor done to address these issues in the Budget? He has given a few small inducements for new shared-ownership buyers, including no stamp duty; an extension of Help to Buy; further inducements to convert retail to residential; removal of the borrowing cap for council building programmes; and funding for housing associations. Most of, if not all, those schemes have problems: some inflate housing prices, and a majority still rely upon developers for delivery. The housing revenue account housing cap will apply only to council housing not already transferred to housing associations. That is about half.

In Kensington, in London and in other areas where property is expensive, the delivery of social rented housing still relies upon selling private high-value property, but this market has failed spectacularly. If we leave the provision of housing to the vagaries of the market, with...
no inducements to ensure people will ever live in the homes built, we will never house our homeless. If we leave disposal of new homes to the conscience of developers, we will never house our homeless.

Let us look briefly at the tax breaks that encourage people into private home ownership, for better or worse, all at the taxpayer’s expense. Council tax, based on 1991 values, is effectively a subsidy to landlords. Capital gains tax relief costs the country about £6 billion a year. The lack of property tax costs, apparently, £11 billion a year. The right-to-buy subsidy costs £2 billion a year. We also have shared-ownership subsidy, tax relief for buy-to-let, and Help to Buy, which pushes prices up, and indeed even subsidises second homes for those earning six-figure sums.

We need a thorough and honest review and a frank discussion about these subsidies—who in reality they are helping—and whether there are better ways to spend taxpayers’ money to provide stable homes for our families, not embarrassing pay-outs to chief executives.

We need a thorough review and a frank discussion of the role and practice of housing associations, now self-styled “developers with social purpose”, and their management of existing and new buildings. We need to get a grip on construction companies offering apprenticeships, for which many quite simply do not have the capacity, let alone the will. A billion pounds in apprenticeship levy lies unspent. We cannot build without builders. We need a nationwide needs assessment to inform our house building. Evidence is a better guide to housing need than developer greed.

On matters of concern in relation to work being carried out, or not, post Grenfell, the Chancellor’s Budget speech mentioned tax 34 times and housing 10 times, but there was not a single mention of Grenfell—not one. Now, residents are very anxious about the possible effects of toxic soil, after a report in The Guardian some weeks ago.

Karen Lee: My hon. Friend has mentioned empty homes. Does she agree that it is a national disgrace that there are still victims of the fire at Grenfell who still do not have permanent housing?

Emma Dent Coad: I do agree. There are 151 households, many of whom I see, and many of them are experiencing deteriorating mental and physical health, so it does not help that, throughout all this, the council has continued its—shall we say?—reputation-covering exercise.

I was present at a council meeting in mid-October, when the council denied knowing about the report on toxic soil, which had been made in February. Two weeks later, the council admitted it did know about the report. That is eight months of inaction, followed by its usual opaque practice, misrepresentation or, some would say, lies. Now there will be soil toxicity tests, but no funding for this, and it will not happen straight away. The council is going to “think about” screening tests on affected residents, but not straight away. Why is this failing and untrustworthy council still in control of Grenfell-affected people and services? My neighbours want an answer, as do I.

I also live there. I have a veg plot within the radius of the soil tested and have been enjoying it all year. Public Health England’s advice is to wash and peel home-grown vegetables, but how do you peel lettuce? We were told the “Grenfell cough” could be caused by anxiety. Five people I know are coughing blood. Now we are told the “Grenfell cough” is real, but we knew that.

The council stated publicly that no housing blocks in Kensington and Chelsea had combustible cladding, but the truth is that we have two with combustible render. The council is trying to minimise bad publicity, while deciding to strip the combustible envelope, as winter approaches. Residents are scared, upset and angry. Communication is appalling. Last week, the council said that there was no start date to this work. Today, it has said Wednesday.

The council applied to the Government for £50 million for the Grenfell recovery plan, including a lot of this work, but there has been not a penny from the Chancellor. If the Government do not trust the council, why would my constituents?

I have been working with fire safety specialists to try to get a grip on the spectrum of issues related to our current situation. The £400 million announced earlier this year for cladding replacement in council buildings was welcome, but it is not enough. Who will pay for the shortfall? Residents who have bought flats in new developments, some under Government schemes, face bills of tens of thousands of pounds. They do not have it. Who will pay for that?

Around London and nationwide, there are social tenants whose buildings have been unclad. Some are in for a second freezing winter. Who will pay their fuel bills? How many elderly and frail people will we lose this winter because they are too afraid to turn up the heating? Not a penny more has been allocated for this. Is that what the end of austerity looks like? I commend the work of Fuel Poverty Action and various local groups that are campaigning hard on the matter. Money must be found. This is a public health emergency. Cold kills.

That brings me to the work of updating or reinstating fire safety and building regulations. I spend a lot of time with specialists in these fields, too. I will be frank: I heard the policing, fire and Grenfell Minister speaking last week on this issue, and it seems that there is no action now. The Government are thinking about it, but we desperately need some movement on this, and there is no commitment even to upgrade building regulations long term. We are instead informed that the industry will deal with this; the industry will pay. I think the industry will pay itself. I am not convinced we are getting anywhere anytime soon on this, and that is completely unacceptable.

In this midst of this housing crisis, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has decided to reinstate the much discredited architectural style wars of the 1980s. This is my period; I started as a journalist at that time and I went through that battle. Pitching neo-classical pastiche against the modern movement will not solve our housing crisis. That is a battle of style over substance, and it is based on snobbery and elitism. I have written a dissertation and a half on this very subject. This is a thinly disguised class war. I sincerely hope that the Secretary of State realises that this is based on fallacy, before we start to see poorly constructed Noddy’s Tory Towns such as Poundbury dumped on our green belt. I would be happy to give Members a full lecture on this one day—just let me know.

Architectural style wars are a distraction from the real issue of providing well-designed, well-constructed homes to suit the needs of desperate families, single people, our elderly and people with specific physical needs. There is nothing in the Budget to fix the unholy mess that we are in, post Grenfell. There is nothing in the Budget to address the dishonesty and greed that have been allowed to flourish in the housing and construction industry, and without such provision we cannot tackle the serious housing crisis that we are facing. Distraction techniques and platitudes will not save lives. Shame on you all.

7 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury got it right in his introduction—I can see he agrees with that—when he set the financial scene and reminded us of the history of the past eight or so years. When this Government came into office in 2010, we faced an economic crisis of almost unprecedented scale. At around 10% of GDP, the deficit was running out of control and unemployment was at a record high. Over the past eight years, the coalition and then the Conservative Government have worked hard and tirelessly to get our public finances back under control. It has not been an easy task. Had we listened to Labour Members, who frequently challenge our agenda, the deficit would still be extremely high and the debt would be a great deal higher than it is now—[Interruption.] The shadow Minister says from a sedentary position, “You’re joking”, but I have lost count of the number of measures of fiscal responsibility that the Opposition have voted against over the past eight years. Had Labour’s programme been adopted, the deficit and the debt would both be far higher than they are today.

Next year, borrowing is going to be down to about 1.4% of GDP, and it will be down to 0.8% by 2023. Critically, the debt as a proportion of GDP has been falling since 2016. The consequence of not getting our deficit and debt under control is that we pay far more in interest payments. Even today, we are paying around £45 billion a year in interest payments, but if the debt were any higher, as it would have been under Labour’s programme, those debt payments would be higher and the interest rates on that Government debt would be a great deal higher as well. That would mean having much less money to fund vital public services.

Hand in hand with the deficit reduction programme goes the Government’s track record on jobs. The unemployment rate has decreased from around 8% in 2010 to around 4% today, and it is now at a 43-year record low. It has never been lower in my lifetime. To those who say that the jobs that are being created are not high-quality jobs, I would say that 80% of them are full time, and I would remind those who say that they are all zero-hours jobs that only 3% of the jobs in the UK economy involve zero-hours contracts.

This track record of financial responsibility over the past eight years has now enabled a certain amount of fiscal loosening, providing extra money to be spent on public services. Both Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen said that austerity was continuing, but let us look at the Red Book. The cumulative effect of all the Budget measures being announced will result, in 2023 alone—the final year of the forecast period—in a £27 billion fiscal loosening relative to the measures that were in place before. There is no way that anyone can describe a £27 billion a year fiscal loosening as a continuation of austerity. In any case, it is not austerity. Austerity implies that it was a choice. It was not a choice; it was a necessity—

Chris Stephens: It was a choice.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman says that it was a choice, but it was not. We simply cannot go on spending way more every year than we raise in tax revenue, because we would eventually lose the confidence of the bond market, as this country did in 1976. At best, we would end up saddling the next generation with a gigantic bill that they would have to pay off. There is nothing noble, ethical or moral about spending more than we can afford and sending the bill to the next generation.

If we look at the fiscal loosening in the Budget, we can see that the NHS is the principal beneficiary, to the tune of £20 billion a year by the end of the forecast period. More immediately, the Ministry of Defence gets an extra £1 billion and the universal credit system gets an extra £1.7 billion. The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury specifically mentioned universal credit in his characteristically lively speech earlier. I remind him that the universal credit system massively strengthens work incentives. Before, we had a system in which effective marginal tax rates were often running at 90% and in which there were cliff edges at 16 and 32 hours, after which people would actually get less money for working more hours.

The Resolution Foundation has carried out research on this. I understand that its chief executive is the former economic adviser to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), and even he says that the total fiscal cost of the universal credit system, with these changes, will be higher than the cost of the old benefits system that it is replacing. So it is going to cost more public money than was being spent before. Universal credit’s track record of getting people off benefits and into work is better than the track record of the benefits system it is replacing. I think that universal credit has been properly funded. It might need a bit of fine tuning in some areas to do with the way in which some of the dates work, and I have spoken to Ministers about some technical changes that could be made. As a whole, however, I believe that the system is fully funded and that it will work.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman believes that universal credit is fully funded, but has he seen the evidence from DWP staff who are saying that they are spending so much time answering telephone calls that they cannot go through and answer the online journals from claimants? Does he not think that there is a problem there?

Chris Philp: When we introduce any new system that involves 5 million recipients, there will inevitably be some level of operational teething problems. These teething problems are on nothing like the scale of those we saw in the early 2000s when Gordon Brown rolled out tax credits and there was unmitigated chaos for some years.
I have had direct experience of universal credit in my own constituency. Croydon South is the joint highest constituency in the country—with Great Yarmouth, I think—for universal credit roll-out, with 43% of claimants now on universal credit. I estimate that around 4,000 Croydon South constituents are now in receipt of universal credit, and in the past six months I have had 21 complaints or problems raised by constituents. That is obviously 21 too many, but viewed in the context of about 4,000 recipients, it would appear that the teething problems are limited in their extent.

Karen Lee: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the people on universal credit in my constituency who are having to use food banks really cannot be described as having teething problems?

Chris Philp: The growth in the use of food banks is of course a phenomenon that we have seen across western Europe. After the Budget, people on universal credit will be £630 a year better off than they were before—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady shakes her head, but that is a simple fact: the allowance has been increased. As I was saying a moment ago, the Resolution Foundation has found that the Government will be spending more money on universal credit following the Budget changes than would have been the case under the old benefits system. I would further point out that the track record of getting people off benefits and into work is better under universal credit than it was under the old benefits system. The way to combat poverty and create prosperity is to get people into work.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman, but he does not seem to be aware that many of the people on universal credit are working.

Chris Philp: I realise that many people on universal credit are working. It is, by definition, an in-work benefit. The point I am making is that it is encouraging more people to take more hours, and it is encouraging people who are not working at all—[Interruption.] I would be happy to take another intervention from the hon. Lady, but perhaps she would like to listen to the answer to her first one. Universal credit is encouraging people who are not working at all to get into work, which is why unemployment is at a 43-year low. A legitimate question that she might ask is whether work is paying enough. This Government have successively increased the level of the minimum wage. This Budget increases it to £8.21 as of next April. That is up from £5.93 in 2010, which is a 38% increase. As I said in my intervention on the Financial Secretary, when we combine that with the increase in the personal allowance, from some £6,500 to £12,500 from next April, the post-tax income of someone on the minimum wage working full time—40 hours a week—has gone up by 44% over that eight-year period. Over the same time, inflation was 25%. So the personal allowance changes and the minimum wage increase have helped people on low incomes more than any other group. That is why income inequality is at a significantly lower level today than it was in 2010.

I turn for a moment to Labour’s plans. Inevitably, they involve spending a great deal of money—more money than contemplated even in the Budget. There is no great merit in spending more than we can afford today if we send the bill to our children and our grandchildren, saddling them with debt and burdening the Exchequer with very high interest charges, which are already high, at some £45 billion a year. As for Labour’s mass nationalisation plans, which are fiscally neutral, I point out that the last time we had mass nationalised industries—up to the 1980s—they tended to be grossly loss-making and required taxpayer subsidy, rather than generating revenue for the Exchequer. To assume that a mass nationalisation programme would be fiscally neutral is a dangerous assumption.

It seems to be assumed that the only measure of a Government’s effectiveness—or compassion—is the total amount that they spend. Of course it is important to fund public services properly, but it is the outcomes that matter, rather than the amount of money spent. Gordon Brown’s mistake was always to confuse spending money with success, when what actually matters is outcomes.

In education, for example, 86% of pupils are now in schools rated good or outstanding, compared with 68% in 2010. Notwithstanding any points that may be made about the funding levels in schools—and finding room to spend more is always welcome—the fact is that children are getting a better education today than they were eight years ago, according to Ofsted, which we can agree is an impartial observer. To the extent that the opportunity to loosen fiscally allows us to spend a little more, especially on services such as the police, it will of course be extremely welcome.

When the SNP leader replied to the Budget, he made some points about Brexit and the risks it poses. Some 61% of Scotland’s exports go to the rest of the UK, and only 17% go to the European Union. The single market that is of the most importance to Scotland, by a factor of about 4, is the United Kingdom single market—[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] I see that view has support from my colleagues. That is the single market that the SNP should focus on most, because it is the one on which their prosperity most depends.

As many hon. Members wish to speak, I shall conclude shortly—[Interruption.] However, I would not want to disappoint Opposition Front Benchers by concluding too soon, so before doing so I wish to thank the Chancellor for the business rate change that he announced in the Budget. Cutting business rates for 90% of the high street—any business with a rateable value of less than £52,000—is a welcome move, and will do something to level the tax playing field. High street stores, which use real estate intensively, suffer a tax disadvantage relative to online companies. Online multinational companies also use lawful, but creative mechanisms so that they do not pay as much corporation tax as our high street shops. The business rate cut for smaller shops will really help them and I strongly welcome it.

One measure on entrepreneurship that I commend to the Chancellor for future Budgets is something that is close to my heart. Before being elected, I set up and ran businesses for 15 years. I set up the first one when I was 24 and floated it on AIM four years later—[Interruption.] I thank Opposition Front Benchers for promoting my career, but I am happy where I am. In setting up and growing that business and others, we benefited from all kinds of relief, including the enterprise investment scheme and entrepreneurs relief. I particularly commend the seed enterprise investment scheme, which is very effective in getting money into complete start-ups—companies being started from scratch. It is a very effective tax
break for getting individuals to invest in greenfield start-up companies. I should declare an interest as my wife recently set up a company that used SEIS to raise capital. The limit is low—£150,000 per company—but it is very effective in getting individuals to make investments. The fiscal cost is quite low: according to Treasury figures it is about £110 million a year. I suggest that future Budgets may have scope to increase the £150,000 per company limit to encourage further significant investment in start-ups at relatively low fiscal costs—I can see the shadow Chief Secretary getting his pen out to write this down. I commend that idea to the Chancellor for future budgets.

I thank the Chancellor for the welcome business rate cut. I commend him and the Financial Secretary for delivering record high employment, record low unemployment and getting our public finances firmly back under control. Had we listened to the Opposition Front-Bench team, we would still be facing financially ruinous debt bills. It will be my pleasure to vote for the Second Reading later tonight.

7.16 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I wish to say a few words in support of the amendment in my name, about the economic context and specifically on some of the tax measures. Everything we are talking about, whether on the tax side or the spending side, depends on the overall performance of the economy and economic growth. This year, we have had fluctuations from one quarter to another, but the assumption is that growth is about 1.5%. According to the independent OBR, it will continue at about that rate for the next five years. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) reminded us, that not terribly optimistic picture is based on optimistic assumptions about the outturn of the Brexit negotiations that may of course not be realised.

There are two underlying reasons why the British economy is growing at just over what it was for the whole of the post-war period up to the financial crisis. One is the serious problem of productivity—a problem that has existed since the financial crisis. A paper was published this morning by analysts from Stanford and Nottingham who looked at why productivity performance is so poor at the moment. After an exhaustive survey, they found that the problem was that high-performing companies in the UK, in productivity terms, had fallen back very badly. The main reason is that those high-performing companies do a lot of a trade, in particular with the single market, and uncertainty has caused their performance to deteriorate. That is reinforced by the second element in the slowing of growth, which is poor business investment—less than half of 1% in terms of fixed business investment last year, and that is clearly a function of the uncertainty that is hanging over the economy because of the Brexit exercise.

I suspect that quite a lot of Members thought that the Finance Bill would be some light relief from the Brexit debate, but unfortunately it hangs over everything. It is the elephant in the room and it explains the economic problems that we face. There was an interesting debate between Conservative Members that, because of the adversarial way we discuss things, was rather glossed over. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and, in the Budget debate, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) expressed the strong view that the Chancellor was taking too many risks and the Budget should have been a good deal tighter than it was. Today we heard the exact opposite argument from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)—that it was far too tight and should have been more relaxed. It was an important debate, and it would be interesting to know how Ministers will combat the arguments from those formidable people.

I will highlight one particular aspect of that debate. This is not a party political point—it happened in the coalition—but the Government continue to refer to the deficit as if it is the same as Government borrowing. Well, of course it is not. The Government borrow for different reasons. They borrow to cover the current deficit and they borrow for investment. Just as companies borrow to invest, the Government sensibly do so. The problem with the current trajectory, as I understand from the Red Book, is that we are potentially heading for yet another squeeze in capital spending. Perhaps the Paymaster General can correct this, but my understanding is that CDEL, which is awful Treasury speak for capital spending, is due to fall next year, 2019-20, as a consequence of the attempt to maintain borrowing at near current levels while at the same time expanding the current Budget. Perhaps he will enlighten us, because if it is true we are doing potentially serious damage to infrastructure that has been starved of capital for many years, as well as to public sector housing and much else.

I would also like clarification on the overall tax burden of the economy, There is a sleight of hand in this Budget. On the one hand, the Government have given tax cuts, but on the other hand—as a consequence of the squeeze on local government spending, which continues unabated and is having a severe impact on local services—council tax will almost certainly have to rise because councils are severely stretched and are providing inadequate services. In some cases, they are approaching bankruptcy and cannot meet their legal obligations. It is not restricted to any one party but, by and large, Conservative county councils are in this position.

Council tax will have to rise, and, in some cases, it probably should have risen earlier. There is nothing in the Red Book that tells us how much revenue local authorities actually get from council tax. That is rather an important figure, and it is important that we see a future projection, which would give us a much clearer picture of what is happening to taxation. On the one hand, the Government are offering direct tax cuts, and on the other they are offering increases in council tax, which at least in income terms is one of the most regressive taxes of all.

The Government have provided substantial additional funding for the national health service for several years ahead, and rightly so, but there is no such guarantee for personal care beyond next year. That matters, because the shortfall in care will fall on the NHS.

Several Conservative Members have been bobbing up and down to ask why we do not take a cross-party approach to this problem. Of course we should—this is a long-term problem—but we cannot do that. Even if they are recent Conservative Members, because there have been repeated attempts at cross-party agreement on personal care financing. There was an attempt
before 2010, which the then Conservative spokesman, Andrew Lansley, pulled out of on the grounds that it constituted a death tax. We then had another attempt in the coalition, when Andrew Dilnot did an authoritative piece of work for us. We reached a consensus and both sides of the coalition agreed to it, and then, come 2015, the key implementation measures were not introduced, so we are back where we were before. Ten years later, and after several attempts at cross-party consultation, there has been no progress, which is why care funding is in such terrible difficulty.

Chris Philp: I have been looking at the Red Book while the right hon. Gentleman has been speaking. He asked two questions. First, he asked about council tax receipts, which will be £34 billion this year and are forecast to rise to £40 billion in 2023-24. Secondly, he asked about CDEL, which is £50.2 billion in the current financial year and is forecast to rise to £65.5 billion by 2020-21.

Sir Vince Cable: I think there are separate sets of figures, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for his clarification. His first point is particularly interesting, and I thank him for his rapid desktop research. His figures suggest there is potentially a very big tax increase in the pipeline, which is one of the assumptions in the Budget that was not spelled out on Budget day.

Kirsty Blackman: Last year’s Red Book explicitly mentioned the impact of immigration and population change on public sector borrowing, and it said that, as the population increased with net migration increasing, public sector net debt would fall. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concerns about the likely impact of a future immigration Bill on the public finances?

Sir Vince Cable: Yes. All the evidence we have shows that net migration has had a positive effect not only on the economy, in per capita terms, but on Government revenue because, by and large, these are young people who work and pay tax revenue to the Government. I totally share the hon. Lady’s concerns about future immigration legislation.

Kevin Hollinrake: The right hon. Gentleman spoke earlier about cross-party consensus on social care. Is he aware of the joint report of the Health and Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee? One of its recommendations was for a social care premium—social insurance of the type used in Germany—to solve this problem. There are no Liberal Democrats on those Committees but will his party nevertheless support such a cross-party approach?

Sir Vince Cable: That was at the heart of the Dilnot proposals that Lib Dem Ministers sponsored and supported in government. If that is the idea, we do not have any problem.

On the income tax changes, and particularly the lifting of the higher-rate threshold at a cost of about £1.3 billion, I certainly do not regard people on £50,000 a year as rich—they have a lower income than we do, among other things—and, in an ideal world in which there was plenty of tax revenue and the economy was booming, lifting the threshold would be perfectly reasonable, but given other priorities it is a bad choice. As it happens, that £1.3 billion is equal to the shortfall between the amount of money the previous Chancellor took from universal credit two years ago and the amount that was reinstated this year. Filling that shortfall would be a much better use of the funding.

Julian Knight: Has the right hon. Gentleman thought about the effect of fiscal drag on productivity? The fact is that, as more people get into the higher-rate tax bracket, the less productive they may become, which lowers tax receipts and lowers productivity in the economy.

Sir Vince Cable: It is a good policy, in general, to eliminate fiscal drag, and the Government should do that. But it is a question of priorities, and the disparity between standard-rate taxpayers, who stand to gain £130 a year from this measure, and upper-rate taxpayers, who stand to get £800 a year, reflects the Government’s priorities, which are completely wrong.

It would be less bad if the Chancellor had been willing to tackle something that he acknowledges is a problem, which is the expense of the reliefs given to higher-rate taxpayers through the pension system. He described the pension tax relief, which costs the Treasury £25 billion a year, as “eye-wateringly expensive”. We started to approach it in coalition, and, in a difficult fiscal situation, this is something that the Government should be addressing here, but they are not. However fair-minded we want to be to all groups of taxpayers, it is very clear that this is a political gesture. The social priorities are completely wrong.

It is very welcome that there has been a big relief for shopkeepers and others through the business rates system, but it does not address the underlying problem that business rates are a bad tax—they tax improvement in property. The Liberal Democrats and some of the think-tanks have been associated with another proposal, and it would not be difficult to replace the business rates system with a tax on commercial landowners. That would be a much simpler system, as there are far fewer landowners than there are people who pay commercial rates. It would be much more equitable, and it would not discourage business improvement. Currently if a factory installs machinery, it makes itself eligible for higher commercial rates. This is a thoroughly bad system, and extreme Treasury conservatism is why the problem is not being addressed.

One thing the Government have done, which is positive, is attempt to deal with the digital sector, but I reinforce the point made by the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) that the magnitudes involved are very small. We are talking about £5 million next year, rising to £440 million, in a context where the National Audit Office, not a political body, has estimated that the retail sector in the UK had lost £9 billion of revenue as a result of competition from internet platform companies—indeed, we are talking about eBay and Amazon. The disproportion is enormous and the measure, although welcome, is very weak.

To conclude, there are a lot of small, sensible things in this Budget—I do not want to be grudging about them—but the big picture is dire, and the big Budget judgment, which is about giving priority to reducing income tax, is fundamentally wrong.
Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who had government experience at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and therefore will support what is clearly a Finance Bill supporting business and the economy.

I rise to support the Bill and to recognise that this Government are focused on the economy. I declare an interest, as a business investor and business person. Hon. Members have applauded growth forecasts; employment has been revised up and wages are set to rise. I think we can all recognise that these are obviously good things. The OBR can give us all comfort that the estimates are independent and therefore scrutinised.

Economic growth is vital to our public services and for household incomes, and it is what delivers living standards for all our citizens.

I wish to focus on income tax. The Chancellor has fulfilled our promise to raise the personal allowance to £12,500 and increase the higher rate threshold to £50,000. Nearly 1 million fewer people will pay the higher rate of income tax. We have a responsibility to ensure that the tax burden is fair and that the economy grows—surely that is what the purpose of government is. Conservative Members want to see the whole cake grow; we do not want to see just bigger and bigger slices taken of a smaller cake. We should not demonise the wealth creators, the job creators and those who drive the economy.

The £50,000 threshold benefits many public sector employees, such as headteachers, consultants, GPs, senior council officers, senior police officers and senior nurses. The threshold lifts 1 million people out, including middle management, engineers and pilots—the list goes on and on. As the right hon. Member for Twickenham said, these are not the fabled rich, who are condemned. How this measure is not progressive is beyond me.

Karen Lee: The hon. Gentleman just referred to senior nurses. I was a nurse some 18 months ago. I was part-time, because I was a councillor, but had I been full-time I would have been on about £29,000. So can he explain where the figure he gave comes from?

Colin Clark: I thank the hon. Lady for the intervention. I think she will be well aware that many people in the public sector, including those in hospital management, and those who may go on from being nurses to being in hospital management, are paid substantially more than £50,000.

The OBR is concerned about this next issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack) asked the Financial Secretary about tax divergence, which is very much the crunch, as it has the potential to affect my constituency. The Financial Secretary mentioned that 1% of the population are paying 28% of tax—in Scotland, that constitutes 19,500 taxpayers. The OBR recently reported to the Treasury Committee that the number of higher taxpayers is lower in Scotland than it estimated, and this has actually cost Scotland between £550 million and £700 million in respect of the original estimate. The OBR said:

“It implies that a much lower share of UK-wide income tax is coming from Scottish taxpayers.”

That means the Scottish economy is more vulnerable to losing higher rate taxpayers, which is a serious consideration, because it affects the growth of the Scottish economy. As Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, it should concern us all. The Scottish economy is clearly vulnerable to the loss of these higher rate taxpayers, and it would look as though they are already beginning to move; they are already beginning to react to the divergence.

The OBR gave evidence on how people, for tax purposes, could change their behaviour. It talked about “a relatively high income individual with a property in Scotland and one elsewhere in the UK, writing to HMRC to say, ‘I live more than half the year’ somewhere else. That would mean that their tax would be paid elsewhere in the UK. Here is the absolute proof that cutting tax rates increases the tax take. As was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who is no longer in his place, if there is tax divergence, people will vote with their feet. They are already doing that, as we are seeing the tax take falling in Scotland. [Interruption.] Would the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) like to intervene? No, he would not. Labour should look closely at Scotland and it should be a lesson on why not to raise taxes.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman needs to be careful with this argument, which I have heard expressed before. Is he seriously encouraging people to engage in tax avoidance?

Colin Clark: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman talks about “tax avoidance” because there is no tax avoidance in this. If we are losing people who would be paying higher tax rates in Scotland because they are choosing not to move to Scotland or they are registering their addresses in England because they spend a lot of their time in England, that is a loss to Scotland, because Scotland is getting greater tax independence. It is interesting that Scottish National party Members will talk about tax avoidance, because this is the demonisation of people who are paying a higher rate of tax. They are not the enemy; they are the friends of the Scottish economy.

Chris Stephens: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that people in Scotland should register themselves in England in order to pay less tax? With all due respect to him, I would have to say that many of us would view that as tax avoidance. [Interruption.]

Colin Clark: As my colleagues are saying from a sedentary position, these people are being driven away. The actions of the Scottish Government are leading to divergence in tax rates between Scotland and England, and that is damaging the Scottish economy.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Why does my hon. Friend feel that the SNP Government in Scotland are so against aspiration?

Colin Clark: I do not know and I really cannot understand it. Now that the Scottish Government are getting tax independence, one would think that they would want to grow the entire economy, instead of damaging parts of it. This should be a salient lesson that tax divergence is damaging; making your country uncompetitive will hurt services. It will cost higher rate taxpayers in Scotland £2,000 to £3,000 more per £100,000 of income. That means that a consultant in Newcastle, who is paying a higher rate of tax. They are not the enemy; they are the friends of the Scottish economy.
may not choose to come to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, which supports my constituency, and that would be very damaging for the public services.

The Finance Bill stimulates the economy; lower taxes will grow the economy. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) is no longer in her seat, but she mentioned a transferable tax history, which is estimated to stimulate the oil and gas industry by £30 billion of investment. I consider that an enormous figure, not a small change. Fiscal stability will benefit the oil and gas industry, and we are grateful to the Chancellor that that is still the target of this Government. Slashing business rates, as the Chancellor has promised, will benefit businesses. However, of course, slashing business rates is not going to happen in Scotland, because that is a devolved matter; the north-east of Scotland got half of the increase in tax, which is damaging businesses in my constituency and other north-east constituencies. Buildings in the north-east of Scotland are being demolished because empty building rates—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Am I hearing the hon. Gentleman right? Is he completely ignoring the some 100,000 small businesses that have benefited from paying no business rates at all because of the Scottish Government’s small business bonus?

Colin Clark: I remind the hon. Gentleman that businesses in the north-east of Scotland—large employers there—are considering knocking down warehouses and large offices, which are not redundant, as they are still fresh and good buildings. That is happening in the north-east of Scotland. One such building in my constituency, which had 2,500 office workers, may well be lost very soon.

Drew Hendry: Evidence it—

Colin Clark: I shall carry on speaking to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, rather than to the hon. Gentleman, who speaks from a sedentary position. I would welcome the Chancellor’s business rates commitments—

Drew Hendry rose—

Colin Clark: I will give way, as the hon. Gentleman has got back up again.

Drew Hendry: I am keen to see how the hon. Gentleman provides evidence to support these accusations that people are knocking down buildings and fleeing their country.

Colin Clark: I could recommend to the hon. Gentleman that he reads the famous The Press and Journal, which I was in just under a year ago, standing in front of a building that had just been knocked down and which used to house 500 people in an office—I shall send him a signed copy of it. Buildings are being demolished in the north-east of Scotland.

Mr Jack: Opposition Members ask for evidence; the evidence is the Michelin factory in Dundee, which has had its rates increased by some £300,000.

Colin Clark: That must be of enormous importance to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

I shall support the Bill and the UK economy. Most importantly, I shall support a Finance Bill that supports jobs.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I wish to focus on two main issues that have already been mentioned by quite a few Members. The centrepiece of the Budget and, in turn, the Bill is the Chancellor’s decision to bring forward the increases to the income-tax thresholds, which has been praised by many Members today. From April 2019, the income tax personal allowance will increase to £12,500 and the higher-rate threshold will increase to £50,000. These increases will come a year earlier than planned, and the thresholds will then be frozen for a year.

Since his announcement, the Chancellor has been basking in praise from Conservative Members for his generosity, when in reality it is a relatively meagre giveaway. In its post-Budget analysis, the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlighted the fact that had the Chancellor allowed the thresholds to increase in line with inflation, as they do by default, they would have reached £12,390 and £48,590 respectively by 2020. That clearly shows that the Chancellor’s income tax commitment is little more than a tokenistic attempt to sustain the myth that the Government are ending austerity. He would have us believe that these policy changes are designed to benefit the low and middle-earners in this country, but once the empty rhetoric is stripped away, the reality is quite different.

Extensive post-Budget analysis from a variety of organisations all comes to the same clear conclusion: the raising of the income tax thresholds will disproportionately benefit the wealthiest individuals and families. Resolution Foundation analysis clearly shows that 84% of gains from the income tax cut will flow into the top half of the income distribution, and almost half will go to the top 10% of households alone. Although both basic-rate and higher-rate taxpayers will benefit from the increases in some way, the scale of the benefit is drastically different. According to the IFS, the typical basic-rate taxpayer will gain £21 per year in 2020-21, while in the same timeframe the typical higher-rate taxpayer will gain £156 per year. That sum is the only meagre offering in the Budget for those people who have borne the brunt of eight years of benefit cuts and pay freezes.

To make matters worse, for some the increase in the personal allowance, coupled with the Government’s inaction on pension tax relief, will mean that they will lose out on the tax relief on their pension contributions. Ahead of the Budget, campaigners including Age UK, Now: Pensions and two former Pensions Ministers, Steve Webb and Ros Altmann, wrote to the Chancellor to urge him to use the Budget and Finance Bill to take action to set straight an inconsistency in the tax rules. According to the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group, together the higher personal allowance and increased contribution rate will mean that the minimum pension contribution for someone earning £12,500 will now cost them £323.40—an increase of £64, or a week’s food shopping for a family or a tank of petrol for the family car. The inconsistency already affected more than 1 million people; with the Budget changes, it will now impact many more.

The Chancellor’s refusal to use the Budget to rectify the issues facing low earners who have fallen victim to a pension lottery is just one of many examples of inaction in the Budget. The Chancellor also failed to use the
Budget to halt the roll-out of universal credit; to provide the long-term funding that is desperately needed for social care and mental health services; to end the funding crisis facing public services; and to address the funding gap facing local authorities. That is to name but a few.

Another main issue is the police cuts, with 21,000 fewer police officers. Just in Cheshire, where my constituency is, £60 million has been cut from the police, with a further £12 million to come. The police and crime commissioner and acting chief constable wrote to me a couple of weeks ago to say that it will be very difficult to sustain those cuts and provide the services. It is important that we provide security for our communities. If we do not, it will be difficult for people to come to this country and to invest, as well. It all depends not only on how we create economic activity but on how we provide a safe environment. That is absolutely key. I urge the Government to increase police funding.

Use of food banks is increasing. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said so eloquently, just saying that austerity has ended does not mean that it has ended, unless the right action is taken and policies put in place. How can we say that austerity has ended when the use of food banks is on the rise, crime is rising, homelessness is rising, NHS waiting times are increasing and councils are struggling? We are talking about the basic services provided by councils—what can they do? Councils are going bankrupt. The Government need to look into that. Austerity has not ended.

Along with my Labour colleagues, I will continue to urge the Government to adopt a fair taxation system. This Finance Bill is nothing more than half measures and tax giveaways. It does nothing to address eight years of economic failure and it fails to include measures that would create a truly progressive tax system, address tax avoidance and close the tax gap. It is time for radical reform of our entire tax system. Only then can we truly transform our economy and ensure a fairer taxation system that shifts the emphasis on to those best able to afford it. Sadly, as it stands today under a Tory Government, we are left with a Finance Bill that will disproportionately affect those people who are already struggling to make ends meet.

7.47 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), but I profoundly disagree with what he has just said. In his last point, he referred to eight years of economic failure, but nothing could be further from the truth. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider some key figures. In 2010, this country was spending a total of £700 billion or so a year and bringing in just £548 billion of tax revenue. In other words, a full £152 billion was borrowed. Fast forward eight years, and this country will spend £842 billion in the next financial year. Why? Because the economy has grown by 17% in that time. Crucially, of that £842 billion, a full £810 billion will be raised in tax revenues. In other words, that £152 billion deficit has shrunk, and shrunk dramatically. The reality is that a country that in 2010 was staring into the abyss can now look forward to a future and say, “Our best days are ahead.” Had this country not got on top of its finances over the past eight years, it would have been not the rich who would have suffered but the poor, the needy, the vulnerable and the hungry. If we look at countries such as Greece and Venezuela that have lost control of their finances, we see that it is the poorest in society who suffer most.

It is important to note a point that increasingly seems to be lost but should not be, and that is how far we have come in respect of employment. The country risks taking it for granted. We have 3 million more jobs than in 2010. In 2010, unemployment had gone up by half a million; that is half a million people whose futures were curtailed, whose opportunities were reduced and whose dreams were eroded. Unemployment means misery, lack of self-esteem and wasted potential. It means hollowed-out communities and a corrosive sense of despair. We should reflect on the successes that have happened since 2010.

Unemployment in our country today stands at just 4%. In Cheltenham, it is under 2%, compared with the rate in France, which is 9%. It is 8% in the eurozone. In Italy, youth unemployment stands at 32%. When I speak to young people in my constituency—last week over the recess, I was speaking to young people at St Mark’s Junior School—I am able to say that, as they grow up and reach the age of 18, I want them to be in a position where they can choose whether to go to university, which is fine, or whether to have an apprenticeship, which is also fine, but, if they want to go into the world of work, driving true social mobility, there also are opportunities for them to do so.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talked about success. Unemployment may be falling, but in-work poverty is rising much more quickly. Is that a success?

Alex Chalk: Income inequality is declining. Any poverty is, of course, something that we want to address, but the best route out of poverty is through employment. If we were to ask individuals whether we should turn the clock back to 2010 when we had half a million more people unemployed, I do not think that they would choose to do so. The reality is that there is no true economic strength without fairness.

I must take issue again with the point made by the hon. Member for Warrington South. He suggested that raising the personal allowance a year early to £12,500, resulted in only “meagre” benefits—that was his expression. For the average family in my constituency, two wage earners each earning the average wage of about £28,000, that will mean a combined addition to the family budget of £260 a year. Does he want to stand up and seriously suggest that that is a meagre benefit? Does he? It is not a meagre benefit. It is more money in people’s pockets to focus on their priorities—on support for their children, support for their futures and support for their daily lives.

Strong families and strong communities require strong healthcare. It is important to note what managing the economy—taking a balanced approach—means for healthcare. It was the Leader of the Opposition who suggested during the last election that a 2.2% increase in health spending would make the NHS the “envy of the world”. Well, it is this Government who will be spending 3.4% above inflation every year. The figures are stark: the total budget will go from about £122 billion a year today to £149 billion a year in 2023—a real-terms increase above inflation of £20.5 billion a year.
Karen Lee: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, to recruit enough nurses to fill all those vacancies and all those jobs that his party is going to create, we need to reinstate the nursing bursary?

Alex Chalk: It is critically important that we do not have a cap for those people who want to become nurses. One thing I found very depressing when I was first elected back in 2015 was that people wrote to me saying, “I want to become a nurse, but I can’t become a nurse, and yet the trust is off taking trips to other parts of the world to recruit nurses from overseas, while I cannot do it here in the UK.” That is something that we should not allow to continue. It is important that the money is spent in the communities that require it. In Cheltenham at the moment, trust managers want to shift all general surgery facilities from Cheltenham to Gloucester, but, as 58 clinicians wrote only today, that would be a mistake. It would be unsatisfactory for care in the whole of Gloucestershire, and I am calling on the trust to think again.

There was also £400 million for potholes, which is a priority for my constituents and something that I take very seriously as well. That is an extra £8 million or so for Gloucestershire. I also welcome the measures to safeguard businesses in our high streets. We all know that they are facing increased pressures, but to take a third off the business rate bill of small businesses in my constituency is a shot in the arm for our high streets and is something of which we can be proud. When I went round high streets in Cheltenham over the weekend, the news from the Chancellor was welcomed. Businesses could look towards a future with real optimism. The scope to roll out these measures is only provided by managing the economy fairly and sensibly. We do not take measures simply because we take some pleasure in eradicating the deficit for the sake of it; we do so because we want to create opportunity in our society. We want to say to our young people, “Be brave and be bold about the future because it is an exciting future.” A country that loses control of its finances loses control of the prospects of its young people. That is why I take pride in what the Chancellor has delivered and why we can say in confidence across this House that the United Kingdom’s best days lie ahead.

7.55 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I rise to speak today to express my sheer frustration at the refusal of this Government to change the implementation date for the stake reduction on fixed odds betting terminals. A six months’ delay from April 2019 to October 2019 may appear to be a short period, but in that six months, the bookies stand to gain nearly £1 billion profit, while many families will lose a loved one.

The industry has known about the stake reduction since April this year, yet, arrogantly, it has made no plans to alter the technical capacities of the machines, and we have to ask ourselves why. Why has it refused to authorise the necessary changes? Why has it refused to accept the moral argument that these machines are dangerous? And how has it been able to use a flawed report, funded by it and structured only to support its argument, to convince this Government to stall the implementation date? Every day snippets appear in the press suggesting that things are not as they should be when it comes to this decision. Private conversations with no opportunity for scrutiny seem to have had more influence than the evidence of the all-party group on FOBTs, the Church, the voluntary sector and, most importantly, the families of those affected and the gamblers themselves.

Unfortunately for this Government, the strength of feeling right across this House regarding this shocking decision to delay the stake reduction will have consequences that may make their position very uncomfortable. I urge the Treasury to accept that it is wrong; that the decision that it has made is immoral; and that people’s lives are more important than the bookies’ profits. However, if the Government are not prepared to do the right thing, I and 76 Members across this House are prepared to do so. We will table a new clause and an amendment after the Second Reading debate tonight to ensure that the real story behind these dreadful machines is heard on the Floor of this House.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me this brief opportunity to raise this issue about which I am passionate and to which I am committed.

7.57 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for letting me speak a bit earlier than I expected. It is a great pleasure to be called so early and I will not abuse that generosity by speaking for too long, because I know that many colleagues want to speak in the debate. I just wish to cover a few areas that have come up in the debate and the Budget more generally: first, the higher rate tax thresholds, which have been mentioned by many hon. Members; secondly, corporation tax and small businesses; thirdly, debt, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) spoke about so interestingly; and, finally, fuel duty and car taxes more generally, which is pertinent to my constituency, with its 9,500 car workers.

On the higher rate tax, I was interested in what was said by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), who is no longer in his place. There is an amendment in the name of all the Liberal Democrats and it is good to see them here this evening in such numbers. The amendment mentioned the “provision for a £1.3 billion tax cut for higher earners”. I pressed the right hon. Gentleman to explain what that would actually mean for productivity and for what we term fiscal drag, a term first used when Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer. It happened in the early part of the Labour Government, which came to office in 1997, and was eased over time. In 2010, it was decided, as an issue of morality, that we would also freeze the higher rate of income tax at the threshold. The reality is, however, that in the long term that has quite a damaging effect on the economy. It means that people are being brought into the higher rate of tax who really should not be there. I know that in my constituency there will be, for example, deputy headteachers, locum GPs and middle managers in local government who are paying the higher rate of tax. They would not have done so within the last generation, but they do now.

When people—this applies in the private sector as well—who pay the higher rate of tax are offered any extra work or overtime, they make a calculation: “Do I take that or do I trade that off against what my tax will be as a result of this?” If people are being charged too much tax at this marginal rate, that reduces productivity,
and that, in itself, has a damaging effect on the economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) mentioned, in 1987, the then Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, lowered the rate of tax from 60p in the pound to 40p in the pound—and guess what? We actually took more tax in as a result.

This is a fundamental point that also applies to corporation tax. Labour Members have made their views very clear in that they would like a restitution of the rate of 26% for large businesses and 21% for small businesses. However, with regard to corporation tax, the proof of the pudding is in the eating—that is, employment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said, the unemployment rate in the UK is 4%. I grew up in a town in the north of England in the 1980s, when the unemployment rate was about 25%. We went through a horrendous recession in our light industrial town. We could not even dream of a rate of 4% at that time. In the EU, unemployment is 8%, on average, and it is 9% in France. My hon. Friend also mentioned Italy and Spain. Think about all those lost opportunities and lost lives through high unemployment. This beds down in communities—I have seen it for myself. The way in which we bring that under control is through productivity or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dover mentioned, in 1987, the then Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, lowered the rate of tax from 60p in the pound to 40p in the pound—and guess what? We actually took more tax in as a result.

The way in which we have approached corporation tax is absolutely correct. On small business rate relief, the proof of the pudding is in the eating—that is, employment. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) mentioned, in 1987, the then Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, lowered the rate of tax from 60p in the pound to 40p in the pound—and guess what? We actually took more tax in as a result.

On debt, as I said in the Budget debate, with a ratio of 82% to GDP, we really should not give ourselves a pat on the back. It is not a good place to be at all. It makes us less likely and less able to effectively withstand the winds of global recession that happen on a cyclical basis. However, we have chosen a path by which, over time, we bring that under control. There are two ways to reduce the GDP-to-debt ratio: through productivity or inflation. The choice of British Governments, for years and years, was inflation. Inflation is a fool’s errand: it destroys living standards and destroys savings. The second approach is productivity. I am really pleased to see in the Red Book that many elements of this Budget really focus and home in on productivity, but we need to keep that going. We need a step change in our economy in this respect.

I turn to what I call car taxes. As the vice-chair of the APPG on fair fuel, and the former chair of said august APPG, I am absolutely delighted to see the freeze in fuel duty. However, I want to make a point about diesel cars in this respect. That is not, obviously, just because my constituency has 9,500 workers in this sector and 93% of the engines that come off the track are diesel cars. We have seen a 45% fall in diesel sales, and that hurts the Exchequer.

This problem originated in Wolfsburg. The irony is that the Germans are now changing their approach with regard to diesel, so the originators of the difficulty within the diesel market are now looking at the market and saying, “Hold on a minute—we need to ensure that clean, modern diesels are supported.” We have a higher excise duty on modern, clean diesels. According to the AA, 270 of the diesel cars currently tested are now within tolerance in that respect. If we have this disincentive, people will hold on to their older cars for longer. These cars can run for a quarter of a million miles—I know; I have one. That means that the older EU5 and EU4 engines will stay on the road longer and pollute more.

We need to get really smart about this and construct the tax system to support all modern petrol and diesel engines while, at the same time, aiding the transition towards new technologies.

On the Budget as a whole, it is quite remarkable to note, as a former personal finance journalist, how we used to have a merry time pulling Budgets apart. We could almost guarantee that, by the end of the first day, we would have something to go at the Government on. With this one, that is not the case. That is a testament to the Chancellor and the team. I will be absolutely delighted to vote for this Bill tonight.

8.6 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Living standards in this country are a national disgrace. The “little extras” Budget did nothing to address society’s systemic issues and continued to prioritise the few over the many. Perhaps the Minister does not appreciate that the future is not brighter if you are standing in a queue at a food bank.

After eight long years of austerity, our public services are deprived of proper funding. Our fire service, NHS, police service and education services are all at breaking point, and “little extras” are simply not enough. While the taxation system continues as it is, with Conservative policies only tinkering around the edges, we will not see a substantial redress of economic inequality in this country. Put simply, the top 10% of the population own 44% of the nation’s wealth. Who does this country’s economy work for? Some in society have suffered eight years of austerity, and some have not. If the Government’s policies are benefiting the few more than they are benefiting the many, we have a systematic issue at the heart of society. Our economic system resembles what the economist Piketty would describe as “useless for growth”. It perpetuates further inequality over time and creates low social mobility, ingraining and preserving the status quo. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer, widening economic inequality.
Labour has a different outlook that sees real value in working people and offers them a fair deal by not raising taxes for 95% of workers but instead fairly raising taxes for the 5% who prosper the most in society. It acknowledges corporations’ role in society and expects them to pay their fair share, raising an estimated £19.4 billion for the public purse. It is not afraid of tackling the very wealthiest and commits to a comprehensive anti-tax avoidance plan—a plan that will work for those who are prepared to pay their fair share of tax and a society that will reap its benefits. This funding will be distributed to all the areas that all of society will benefit from: a properly funded NHS, free university education, a national education system, and a national transformation fund. Labour will rebuild Britain and make this Government’s destructive austerity programme an ideological choice of the past. This is how we will radically change society; this is how we will end austerity; and this is how the Labour party, when—not if—we are in government, will offer a fair deal for everybody in our society.

8.9 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate not only to support the Bill, but to associate myself with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who unfortunately is no longer in his place. In his opening remarks, he mentioned some words by the late Baroness Thatcher, and on reflecting on that, it is clear to me that some things never change. From what we have heard this evening, it is clear that the Labour party would still have the poor poorer as long as the rich were less rich. As I say, it is a great pleasure to speak in the debate. I will keep my remarks brief, as many other colleagues—from across the House, I am sure—will want a chance to speak about the great things this Government have included in the Bill.

Just two short weeks ago, we heard a Budget from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Bill delivers on a number of promises made in that Budget. Key among these is that this Conservative Government are cutting taxes for hard-working people and lifting the lowest paid in our society out of income tax altogether. Our increase in the personal allowance will mean that, in 2019-20, basic rate taxpayers will pay about £130 less tax than in 2018-9 and £1,205 less tax than in 2010-11, when the coalition Government came to power.

Unfortunately, as I pointed out in the Budget debate just two weeks ago, my constituents will be unable to benefit from the raising of the higher threshold, as the SNP Government in Edinburgh would rather punish the strivers and the grafters—the policemen, teachers, entrepreneurs and wealth creators—than reward them, the policemen, teachers, entrepreneurs and wealth creators that we need to attract to Scotland, especially to the north-east of Scotland. I could go on, but I will not because I have a lot to get through.

We are hearing exactly what we heard two weeks ago from the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry)—doom and gloom. This is the politics of gripe and grievance, and SNP Members cannot even find it within themselves tonight to welcome the huge strides that we have taken in supporting the oil and gas sector since 2014. I share the frustration of the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) about the oil and gas sector, although I would say that that is an issue for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, rather than the Treasury right now. But no reference was made to the welcome given by Oil and Gas UK or indeed by individual companies in that sector for our commitment to the stable regulatory and fiscal regime that, since 2014, has made the North sea one of the most attractive basins in the world in which to invest. I think that is something all representatives from Scotland, especially from the north-east of Scotland, should celebrate and thank this Government for.

As well as slashing income tax for millions of people, the Bill will implement a number of indirect tax cuts, such as the freezing of duty rates on beer, on ciders and most of all on whisky. This is a measure that we Scottish Conservatives have lobbied on relentlessly, and it will be a great boost to our local breweries and distilleries, such as Deeside Brewery in Banchory and Royal Lochnagar at Balmoral, both of which I have the honour of representing in this place.

There are freezes to support our haulage sector—heavy goods vehicles duty will be frozen for 2019-20. I am sure the importance of this freeze to the British haulage industry will be obvious to everyone as we prepare to leave the European Union. I have a dream that one day these vehicles will be able to transport Scotch whisky, which we as a Government are supporting; Aberdeen Angus beef from farms that are championed by the Conservatives, but abandoned by the SNP; and Peterhead haddock fished from this new sea of opportunity, with us out of the common fisheries policy, being delivered by this Government, along the Aberdeen western peripheral route, if the Scottish Government ever manage to resolve the mess they have got into on that road and do so without wasting even more of Scottish taxpayers’ hard-earned cash.

Kirsty Blackman: If we do get this wonderful Aberdeen parliament—it is the best in the world, I would suggest—on lorries and they drive down to Dover but are then not able to cross the channel, what does the hon. Gentleman expect will happen to the Peterhead haddock?
Andrew Bowie: The hon. Lady has no faith in this Government to deliver a deal that is going to result in frictionless trade, and that surprises me. It surprises me that she does not have the faith that I have in the Government to deliver the deal that I think will be coming and result in frictionless trade between ourselves and the European Union, just as we have frictionless trade right now.

The measures in this Bill are exactly what the Government should be introducing to support our economy at a time when it has its fair share of challenges to overcome, but that is also rich with opportunities. For this reason, I will be supporting the Bill tonight. We are supporting aspiration, encouraging growth and creating jobs, with unemployment at its lowest level since the 1970s. We are making Britain an attractive place in which to invest, and we are helping the lowest paid.

I was struck by what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said about speaking to the next generation. He spoke about the huge strides we have taken and about the strength of the economy since 2010. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned, on Friday, I was privileged to address the UK Youth Parliament and listen to its Members. This Chamber was packed with enthusiastic, passionate, committed and driven youngsters. We owe it to them to leave this economy in a better state than the one in which we found it in 2010, and to create opportunities, not lumber them with debt, as the 40 unfunded spending commitments made by the Opposition since the general election would do.

Quite frankly, Labour Members should be ashamed of themselves for the reckless way in which they trot out commitments without recognising that we have to pay for them and the damage that they would reap on the next generation. I am proud to support a Government who are refusing to do that and who, with this Bill, are committed to helping the working people of this country. This is the party of the working people of this country—all of this country—and I am proud to give the Bill my support tonight.

8.16 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie). He has proved for me the point I came to when I was listening to the Financial Secretary and putting together my remarks for this debate. Politics is a mixture of rhetoric and reality. It was two years ago at that very Dispatch Box that the former Chancellor, George Osborne, announced that austerity was over, and now the current Chancellor tells us that austerity is coming to an end.

The rhetoric we have heard during the past two weeks has led me to conclude that many Conservative Members are modern-day Warleggans. They remind me of the eight-year-old boy in my constituency was stopped by a teacher and asked why he was taking so many tomato ketchup sachets. His answer was so he could take them home and put them in boiling water to make soup for him and his family. That makes me want to weep, but it is not a special case. Suzanne McGlone of the Crookston Community Group said:

“While this incident would shock most people, it is actually the lower end of the scale.”

That is the reality of the current social security system.

On top of the cuts, the litany of evidence about the pressures faced by beleaguered staff in the Department for Work and Pensions is coming to fruition. I tabled a parliamentary question, and I got the answer during this debate. I asked a simple question: how many workers in the Department for Work and Pensions are currently dealing with the national tier telephony service? I was advised that 400 staff are now dealing with phone calls. To put that into perspective, according to parliamentary answers, 4,504 DWP staff are chasing social security fraud. That is an unbelievable comparison. DWP staff are telling us that they are having to deal with so many telephone calls from claimants that they are unable to process online journals. What does that mean? It means payment delays, rising food bank use and more people getting into poverty.

Stephen Kerr: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Gentleman approaches this subject, but perhaps he can enlighten the House as to why, after it was agreed that social security powers would be devolved to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government in Edinburgh, it is taking so long for the SNP Scottish Government to get to grips with the issues of social security.

Chris Stephens: I have just given some examples of how broken the UK social security system is. If the hon. Gentleman seriously believes that any devolved Government could address the mess of the social security system in the UK within weeks, he is kidding himself on.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) is clearly unaware that there are 4,000 people, not 400, chasing rather than helping. I heard Gaelic mentioned today, and he should know that the word “Tory” comes from the Irish Gaelic “Air an Tóir”—pursuers. That is what they are doing in the DWP—pursuing people mercilessly, rather than helping them, as my hon. Friend pointed out.
Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend is quite right. Conservative Members try to divide people on the basis that Conservatives are for aspiration and the rest of us are not. According to the Conservative party, there are the underserving and the deserving poor. No one deserves to be poor in this country, and that should always be the case.

Danielle Rowley: I held a debate recently in Westminster Hall about split payments, and I asked the Minister answering the debate what support was going to the Scottish Government and what money there was to help create a different system in Scotland. I have yet to receive an answer. I also asked the Treasury how it defines austerity, and it could not give me an answer. What does the hon. Gentleman think about that?

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Lady for that, because the point is well made. I was at the Westminster Hall debate she secured, and she gave an excellent speech on why we need split payments in universal credit. The reality is that the Scottish Government want to do split payments, but the Department for Work and Pensions is trying its best not to. That is despite the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am a member, telling it that it should engage positively with the Scottish Government. The Department should perhaps use what is happening in Scotland as a pilot, which it could then roll out across the UK. Where individuals are subjected to domestic abuse and go through the universal credit system without split payments, the hon. Lady and I have a very real fear that that domestic abuse will become worse.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: Not at the moment.

We have heard warm words about rising wages from those on the Government Benches, but there has been no mention whatever of the fact that 4 million people are in insecure work. There has been complete silence about the Taylor review and what measures the Government will introduce as a result. The reality is that low pay and poorer living standards are on the rise.

As I said, there are 400 people dealing with telephone calls in the Department for Work and Pensions, but 4,504 chasing DWP social security fraud. There are also 400 people employed across the UK by the national minimum wage compliance unit. How are we going to chase these rogue employers if there are only 400 staff chasing up compliance with the minimum wage?

That brings us nicely to the issue of public sector pay and whether there is a public sector pay cap. Earlier, I made an intervention on the Minister. I did not really get an answer, and I do not think that anyone who has raised this issue in the last few weeks has got an answer. The reality is that the public sector pay cap is still in place across UK Government Departments. Why is it still in place? Under freedom of information, we now know that the departmental permanent secretaries got together in February this year and agreed the joint position across all UK Government Departments that there would be a pay rise of 1% to 1.5% for public sector workers. I find that extraordinary, because there are 200 separate pay negotiations across UK Government Departments, so how about a bit of efficiency and small Government from those on the Conservative Benches?

Let us reduce the number of pay negotiations from 200. If the departmental permanent secretaries can agree one negotiation, there can surely be one negotiation with the trade unions.

Those on the Scottish Conservative Benches have made a number of, shall we say, interesting observations today. I was interested in the elaborate tax avoidance scheme suggested by the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark); if someone is a higher rate taxpayer in Scotland, they should consider registering themselves somewhere else in the United Kingdom. That is tax avoidance by any description.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman is making comment on the speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who is being reported as having said something he did not say. The hon. Gentleman should not be permitted to say that. How can that be corrected?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s point, but it is a point of debate, not a point of order for the Chair. It is, I am very glad to tell the House, not my responsibility to adjudicate between Members who sit on the Government Benches and Members who sit on the Opposition Benches on particular points of fact. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) is in order in the eloquent speech he is making.

Chris Stephens: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Hon. Members can read Hansard tomorrow and come to their own conclusions.

Scottish Conservatives were complaining earlier about office closures. I find that fascinating from a political party that has put a meat cleaver to the jobcentre network and a meat cleaver to HMRC offices across the UK. You really could not make it up.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely fascinating point about the Conservatives calling for the richest to relocate to avoid tax. Continuing that logic, they should say that those earning less than £33,000 in England should register in Scotland. We know that the many get the deal in Scotland, but they speak for the few, as ever.

Chris Stephens: My hon. Friend makes a fascinating observation, but I think he will be disappointed by the response from the Scottish Conservatives. It will not be on their crib sheet, so I am sure they will not agree.

Stephen Kerr: To be clear, my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) did not ever, at any time, suggest that Scottish taxpayers should relocate. He was simply pointing out the consequences that might flow from the growing tax gap between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Chris Stephens: I am not sure whether that was an intervention or a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Suffice to say, once again, that I will allow hon. Members to read Hansard tomorrow morning and reach their own conclusions.

In this centenary year of the women’s vote, what is missing from the Bill and the Budget most of all is anything for women born in the 1950s. That is a disgraceful
omission. I am delighted that the Work and Pensions Committee has agreed to my suggestion to hold an inquiry so that we can get to the bottom of helping women born in the 1950s to get justice, to get their pensions and to get compensation.

We were told that austerity is over. It is not. We were then told it is coming to an end. It is not. For the poorest and most vulnerable in our society who have had to pay the price of austerity, austerity must end. That is why I will not be supporting a Second Reading for the Finance Bill.

8.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on Second Reading.

After all the years of hard work since 2010, and the necessary repair of the public finances after the catastrophic failures of the last Labour Government, this Budget was a turning point for our country. The Government are meeting their fiscal rules three years early and the deficit has been reduced to its lowest level since 2001. Debt has started its first sustained fall in a generation. The Bill reflects the success of that hard work and it rewards the British people for what they have achieved.

No Government have money of their own, only taxpayers’ money. It is right that hardworking taxpayers be allowed to keep more of their own money now that the economy is back on track; people in Stoke-on-Trent have more money in their pockets due to the measures in the Bill. It is also right that a new path is set for the public finances that reflects the huge efficiencies and fiscal improvements that have been achieved. Combined with Brexit, the Bill means that after eight years of hard work to get out of the mess left behind by the Labour Government, those of us on the Conservative Benches can focus on the measures that will take our country forward to a global future in the decades ahead.

What a contrast in approach: a Conservative party working to take us forward to the 2070s against a Labour party scheming to take us back decades to the 1970s. In his initial remarks, the shadow Minister, who is no longer in his place, tried to say that the Conservatives are not a party of opportunity. I would like to ask him what he would say to my constituents, as well as millions across the country, who were subjected to a life of dependency and worthlessness under the last Labour Government and who are now in work thanks to Conservative policies.

At a time of momentous change as we deliver on Brexit, the Government’s continuing commitment to sound economic management is to be welcomed. There are continuing efforts to make the tax system fairer, with anti-avoidance measures to ensure that legitimate reliefs are not abused. In addition, there are measures to increase the generosity of certain reliefs and exemptions where they encourage behaviours that are beneficial to the economy and to society. For example, the quintupling of the annual investment allowance, from £200,000 to £1 million, is a strong response to the very temporary uncertainty that Brexit might bring.

That measure is hugely welcomed by manufacturers in Stoke-on-Trent South, as it will be across the country. Indeed, when I visited Walkers Nonsuch Toffee last week, it was very clear that these measures will see it invest in more new machinery to build on the great success it is experiencing. I can tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I very much enjoyed tasting some of its products on my visit. A family business since 1894, it exports England’s finest toffee from my constituency right around the world, with many of its largest growing markets in South Korea, Australia and China. Equally, I welcome measures such as the 60% increase in the charity small trading tax exemption limit to £8,000 and £80,000 depending on turnover, and the extension of the first-year allowance for electric car charging points for four years. While there is a case to be made for having reliefs and exemptions to encourage beneficial outcomes, there is also a clear case for increasing taxes on harmful and detrimental behaviours. That is why I welcome the action on white, high-strength ciders and continuing strong fiscal disincentives to smoking, both of which are having major impacts on the lives of individuals, public health and our NHS.

In addition, I welcome the measures for a new tax on the largest online companies to ensure that they pay a fair share. That is very important for the revival of our town centres, as is reducing taxes on smaller retailers and putting in place funding for the town centres in places such as Longton and Fenton, which I hope will benefit from the additional funding for the conversion of some of the empty units.

For areas such as Stoke-on-Trent, which is made up of six historic market towns with a strong manufacturing tradition, opportunities have arisen for a sustained revival. The Office for National Statistics last week reported that “around half of total production growth in Quarter 3 was driven by manufacturing.” That is very good to see and suggests that the slippage in quarters one and two was anomalous to a longer-term trend of manufacturing growth under this Government. Goods exports are also back in quarter 3 to a position where they are rising faster than service exports, which is a positive sign for a country that needs to rebalance our national economy to areas where people are skilled and proud to make things. No manufacturers are more skilled and proud than the local advanced manufacturers of Stoke-on-Trent.

Moving on to trade and our global approach, we need to ensure that trade is more international as we move through Brexit. Global Britain starts from a solid economic base, underpinned, of course, by the attraction of a world-renowned, trusted, legal system and sound rules of governance. As a country that plays by the rules, the UK is a great partner to trade with and a great place to invest in. I know that the Government will rightly enter all trade negotiations in a spirit of optimism and generosity in offering free and fair rules-based trade deals. There are great opportunities ahead.

In Stoke-on-Trent, despite manufacturing making up 15% of the economy, I am afraid that we do not export enough of the fantastic products that we make, falling well behind our statistical neighbours in the rest of Staffordshire. Far too often, historical trade beyond the EU has been occurring by chance rather than from concerted efforts to promote British products. Brexit must lead to opportunities to broaden trade and especially to help smaller businesses in places such as Stoke-on-Trent to export more, and it is pleasing to see the Department for International Trade ramping up its efforts in these global markets. We can look to open up new channels
for inflows and outflows of foreign direct investment, particularly to facilitate UK direct investment in sales and distribution operations beyond the EU, and look to strengthen our presence in key markets of the USA, the Commonwealth, South America and south-east Asia, which promise many opportunities for Stoke-on-Trent’s fantastic export offer.

There is much to be positive about in the Government championing free and fair trade, but it is inescapably the case that some of our competitors, in an effort to boost their state-aided, quasi-private businesses, do not always play by the rules. So, where we are rightly open to proffering carrots, we must also be pretty clear that we will keep a few sticks if the agreed rules with our new trade partners are not kept. I know from correspondence I have had with Department for International Trade Ministers and, indeed, the Prime Minister, that this is very much the case and the intention, moving forward.

Global Britain is our future and we must be prepared for that future so that we can seize the opportunities available on the world stage. The Bill certainly moves us forward to that future. Through a fairer tax system, growth deals, city deals, sector deals, local funds, transport projects, devolved funding and international trade support for local businesses on the world stage, this Government is ensuring that no part of the United Kingdom is left behind and, as part of that agenda, I am very happy to support the Bill tonight.

8.39 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton). This Finance Bill does not address the fundamental funding problems in our communities and public services. During the Chancellor’s Budget speech, he told us that the era of austerity was nearly over. He told us about the money for the “little extras” for our schools and that all would be rosy as he increased tax thresholds. Perhaps he was too distracted thinking up bad jokes to fully appreciate the effect of his Budget and policies, which mean that for many people the era of austerity is far from over. The Budget did not provide the substantial funding our public services need to be reliable and decent, and failed to invest properly in our public services. This is quite clearly a continuation of austerity.

My borough of Enfield has seen its funding cut by £161 million since 2010, which is well over 50% of its government funding, with other cuts still to come, and it is not alone. Like Enfield, most councils have been cut to the bone. Demand-led pressures on areas such as children’s services and adult social care will mean the council having to cut already-reduced services. Enfield has been affected by damping. The Government, having worked out what it needed, decided to take money away and move it elsewhere. I ask the Minister: when can we have that money back to fund the services that Enfield needs, and which the Government agree it needs? Can we have that money back to fund the services that Enfield needs, and which the Government agree it needs?

For such councils, austerity is not over, but will carry on for years to come. Is he pleased to see councils failing—councils such as Northampton—and going bust on the Government’s watch? The Government can fix this but choose not to.

Policing remains under-resourced. Last week, a 98-year-old man was seriously assaulted in his home in my constituency and now lies seriously ill in hospital, and today I learned there had been a stabbing near Arnos Grove station. What does the Minister have to say about the increase in crime and the cuts to policing in my constituency and across the country? Is austerity over for them? Yesterday, I spoke to the two police officers and one police community support officer charged with policing one ward of 10,000 people in my constituency. Does the Chancellor think that is sufficient? I invite him to come and listen to the concerns of local residents, victims of crime and those who live in fear. Why isn’t anything being done to reverse these cuts? Is the Minister happy with the level of police funding?

Education is another area of failure for the Government. The idea that £400 million for so-called “little extras” goes anywhere near addressing the funding crisis in schools is insulting. I am a school governor at Eversley Primary School in my constituency, and I am missing a governors meeting tonight to take part in this debate to let the Government know how schools are suffering with their budget cuts. In my conversation with the headteacher earlier today, she told me that the school was facing a £500,000 budget deficit next year and was now relying on the donations of parents and staff to pay for resources. Eversley is an outstanding primary school and is not alone in my constituency facing a funding crisis that is a direct result of the Government’s policies. If the Minister does not believe me, he is welcome to meet me and headteachers in my constituency to look at their budgets for next year. He suggests there is more money for schools, but does he realise there are more children in our schools than ever before?

Even for school meals, the Government have taken no account of the increase in food prices or inflation since 2010, meaning that the budget for producing free school meals for all pupils from reception to year 2 has remained the same for more than eight years at £2.30 per meal. That makes it harder to provide a nutritious meal for children in their early school years. How is that joined up with the Government’s strategy on tackling childhood obesity? If the Chancellor wants to know where to find additional funding for education, he could look at the Education and Skills Funding Agency, which last year spent £17 million re-broking failing academies to other academy chains. Why is there no scrutiny of this shocking waste of taxpayers’ money?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) mentioned so eloquently, in an attempt to shore up and support bookmakers, the Chancellor decided to give them more time to make more profits from fixed odds betting terminals—and thus more revenue for the Treasury—thereby condemning hundreds of people to the abyss mislay brought on by gambling addiction, with many suffering great personal harm and some committing suicide. What a shocking state of affairs.

There was no help in the Budget either for people on universal credit. The £1.7 billion put back in by the Government is less than a third of the £7 billion taken out. That is no help to a local resident losing £58 per week as she migrates from family tax credits to universal credit. The amount she is losing is going towards funding the tax cuts in the Budget. The Minister spoke of fairness in his opening speech. Where is the fairness for her?

The Chancellor issued a caveat in his statement, saying that the Budget would be all off if there were a no-deal Brexit. What the Bill aims to do is give the Government sweeping powers to amend tax legislation
in such an event. It is another attempt at a power grab, which is something that we have become used to with this Government. Once again, Parliament is being sidelined.

The Government’s economic failure will continue with this Finance Bill. The Bill and the Budget are not fair. They are failing our communities by not replacing the police officers whose numbers have been cut since 2010, by not giving local authorities the funds that they need, by not providing what is needed for our schools, and by not helping the most vulnerable in our society.

A fair taxation system is for the common good, and should underpin shared prosperity through universal services. The Bill does not offer a progressive and fair tax system, and it means more austerity for the vast majority of the people. The Minister forgets at his peril that the people who benefit from tax cuts are also the people who are asked to make donations to cover the funding cuts in their children’s schools, who experience the burglaries that police no longer attend, who have seen a deterioration in public services, and who are worse off under universal credit. Austerity is not over for them either.

The Bill is not fair. It does not help our communities, including the most vulnerable, and it is not fit for purpose.

8.45 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). Although I do not agree with all his views, I thought that the way he put them across was clear and impassioned, and I congratulate him on that.

I must draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, because I want to focus most of my remarks on business and I was in business for most of my life before entering Parliament, but I will begin by touching on other elements.

As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on poverty, I particularly welcome the measures relating to the personal allowance and the increase in the national living wage. When combined, those measures mean that people who are in full employment and earning the minimum wage will be £3,955 a year better off in cash terms than they were in 2010, which will transform many lives. We simply could not continue with a situation in which the Government were supporting business through tax concessions and tax credits; it is right for business to stand on its own two feet. I hope that the national living wage will increase at some point, as it must if we are to reach a real living wage. The gap is narrowing, but our aspiration should be to ensure that, in a prosperous society, everyone prospers.

I also welcome the extra measures for universal credit, which were called for by many Conservative Members. The extra £2 billion a year will make a big difference to a system that is already working well in many ways. It is not without its faults, and we need to focus on the areas in which it is not right as well as those in which it is, but it, too, will make a huge difference. It was introduced in Ryedale, in my constituency, early in 2017. There were initial problems with some of the payments, but following measures that the Government introduced at the end of that year, most of them have been alleviated.

The 33% rate reduction for many businesses is welcome, as is the fund for investment in our high streets. However, the main issue affecting the retail environment is not the level of business rates, but the migration of consumers from shopping in retail premises to shopping online. We cannot simply cut business rates to deal with that problem. The Chancellor’s contribution is welcome, but we need other measures, too. At some point, we will need a structural review of the business rates system for retail premises. There is no doubt that online retailers pay a much smaller proportion of their turnover in business rates than retail high street premises—about four times less.

Local authorities also need to do their bit. Too often, they are giving permission for out-of-town shopping centres. Consent has been given to four in York, all of which will offer free parking. The city centre car parks run by the local authority are charging £2.50 an hour, which is massively disadvantaging businesses in the city centre. Businesses were telling the local authority that this was going to happen many years ago, and it has had a devastating effect on many high street businesses.

I am most pleased with the Government continuing their corporation tax reductions; it is absolutely the right thing to do. I am also pleased that they are continuing provisions such as entrepreneurs’ relief, the seed enterprise investment scheme and the new enterprise incentive scheme. The Opposition think, “We can simply increase corporation tax. It’s a victimless crime. We’ll collect all this extra money and then the corporations will pay.” That is not how it is. When the Opposition speak on these issues, whether about requisitioning parts of businesses or taxing companies more, they remind me of the Churchill quotation—that some people look at private enterprise as a tiger to be shot or a cow to be milked, when it is actually “the strong horse that pulls the whole cart.”

And that is the reality.

The Opposition simply want to raise corporation tax, and they think that corporations will just pay and that will be it. Of course they will pay extra tax, but the consequence in a competitive market is that prices will go up. At the end of the day, all consumers pay all taxes. The reality is that excess returns in a competitive marketplace get competed away right down to the cost of capital. Therefore, if we put up corporation tax, the pre-tax profit has to rise to ensure the same return on a post-tax basis. All that will happen in a competitive market—most of our markets—is that prices will go up and the consumer will pay. That is the reality, so I welcome the reduction in corporation tax because it encourages inward investment in this country.

Not all our markets are competitive and not all our enterprise is in competitive markets, so I welcome the fact that we have brought forward a digital services tax for one market that is not competitive—the huge technology giants that are dominating the landscape and not paying their fair share of taxes. It cannot be right. Those companies benefit from the fact we have a well-funded education system, hospitals, welfare system, social care system and pensions system. They cannot just trade in this country, switch the profits to a foreign jurisdiction and avoid tax. It is absolutely right, historic and brave that the Chancellor has acted on this, outside an agreement with the OECD. It would clearly be better if we worked internationally, but it is right to take this first step.
There is one area where the market is not competitive and which I am heavily involved in as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance—that is, the relationship between business and banks. Some 90% of business lending is dominated by the four biggest banks—Royal Bank of Scotland, Lloyds, Barclays and HSBC—but when something goes wrong, there is no way on earth a small business can compete with a bank when trying to resolve disputes. It simply cannot be right that these banks can use their financial power in order not to be held accountable when something goes wrong with their own customers. We have seen many cases and have talked about this issue before in Parliament. I know that this is not part of the Finance Bill, although I would very much have liked it to be.

The Chancellor has said that he will support the recommendations of the Financial Conduct Authority to expand the Financial Ombudsman Service from its current jurisdiction of £150,000 compensation limit to £350,000, but most cases we deal with in the all-party group are in the millions of pounds. I am delighted that the Chancellor has just walked in while I am talking about this issue. There is a very good example in an article by Jonathan Ford in today’s Financial Times. The bank sold Arthur Holgate & Son—a company turning over £2 million—an unsuitable interest rate hedging product, sending it under; it went into administration. How on earth is Arthur Holgate & Son supposed to deal with that and take Barclays to court? The company was offered £311,000 in compensation, but it eventually managed to insure the legal fees for the court action and got a settlement off Barclays of £10 million. Most companies that have gone through court action and got a settlement off Barclays of £10 million. Most companies that ha ve gone through court action and got a settlement off Barclays of £10 million. Most companies that have gone through this process simply do not have the funds to take a bank to court. That cannot be right.

Stephen Kerr: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does in the APPG on fair business banking. Many thousands of small and medium-sized businesses were mistreated by the banks during the period that we often discuss in the Chamber. Does he agree that it is vital for capitalism in this country and the enterprise economy that justice is done and seen to be done for them?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right. Capitalism depends on a fair and level playing field, and that is not where we are at the moment. As well as the expansion of the Financial Ombudsman Service, which we fully support, our all-party group proposes the introduction of a financial services tribunal that works in pretty much the same way as an employment tribunal. A company could take a bank to court without standing the costs of that bank, with full powers of disclosure, and justice could be seen to be done, which is critical.

Jonathan Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman knows that I share his view on this issue, and I commend his work as chair of the all-party group. There is considerable agreement on both sides of the House that this needs to be resolved, and it is not a satisfactory position. As we have the Chancellor in the Chamber—or we did; he has disappeared—may I ask the hon. Gentleman whether he agrees that the will of the House on this issue should not be underestimated?
[Siobhain McDonagh]

Through FOBTs, bookmakers have facilitated a form of gambling at its most irresponsible, addictive and exploitative. With 43% of FOBT users thought to be problem or at-risk gamblers, it is no surprise that these machines have been called the “crack cocaine” of gambling. Even the Government have described them as a “social blight”.

We already know that FOBT machines can have a truly devastating impact on the lives of individuals, but they are even worse than that. In my constituency of Mitcham and Morden, they come hand in hand with a worrying range of related problems for my local area, because as FOBTs have grown more prevalent in the betting shops around the town centre, the culture of reckless gambling they promote has contributed to an epidemic of drinking, drug taking and antisocial behaviour.

In many cases, that activity now takes place inside the betting shops and bookmakers have become hubs for illicit activities and antisocial behaviour. That has seen local businesses suffer and driven customers away from a town centre that has so much to offer, but which some now worry has become less safe.

Just this week, I have had to write to one of the bookmakers in Mitcham town centre, Betfred, concerning reports of drug use, drug dealing and stolen goods being sold inside the shop. Mitcham town centre, like many town centres, faces many challenges in the retail sector, but it is not helped by the attraction of people to these bookmakers in a confined area at the same time that the number of police has fallen. No longer do we have a safer neighbourhood town centre team of police, so the behaviour gets worse and more women do not want to bring their children to the town centre, as they would see street drinking, brawling and men urinating in the street.

I am sure that my constituency is not unique in experiencing those issues. Betting shops are disproportionately clustered around some of the most deprived parts of the country, and the proliferation of FOBTs has served only to exacerbate many existing problems. That is why I must urge the Government seriously to reconsider their decision to delay the implementation of the £2 maximum stake: the longer it takes to bring an end to this horrible and exploitative form of gambling, the more unnecessary harm will be done to vulnerable individuals and to our town centres.

Implementing the new maximum stake might not bring an immediate end to the problems facing our communities, as those problems might already have gripped them too tightly, but it represents a vital step in the right direction—a step that we should not hesitate to take any longer.

9.4 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), not least because I shared a platform with her during the Conservative party conference. It was great that she took the opportunity to attend the party conference and I felt a bit of a convert to her cause with regard to the reassessment of some green-belt land that might not otherwise really be described as green belt.

Anyway, that is obviously a topic for another day, as is, possibly, the subject of fixed odds betting terminals. My son, Sam, used to manage a Betfred, and he would occasionally regale us with stories of the people who came in. The store would be empty all Sunday afternoon, then someone would come in for the last hour of the day and blow £400 or £500 on one of those machines in an hour. That would make keeping the shop open all day worth while. I am not making a political point here, but it was the Labour Government who introduced the legislation that gave us fixed odds betting terminals. Personally, I think it is to be celebrated that this Government are going to see their demise, or at least a reduction in the stake to £2. Whether that happens at one point or another, I am personally glad that it is happening at all.

Actually, none of that was what I wanted to talk about this evening. I want to talk about a slightly abstract topic. I understand that it was Tiberius, the second Roman emperor, who said that it was the duty of a good shepherd to shear his sheep but not to skin them. I say “his sheep”, because obviously they were not so politically correct in those days. He obviously meant “his or her sheep”. I understand that that maxim is on the wall in No. 11 Downing Street, although I have not been privileged enough to go in and see it for myself. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) can confirm that for me.

How do I know that to be true? I read it in an excellent textbook, “Taxation: Policy and Practice”, by Andy Lymer. Andy is professor of taxation at Birmingham University, and I went to see him recently in order to educate myself. I think it is the duty of all MPs to adopt continuing professional development and to ensure that we understand something about the topics that we are talking about, although in my case it is clearly a very small something.

Anyway, the point was well made by Tiberius: we should not overtax our people. He clearly knew what he was talking about because, when he left office in 37 AD, the were 3 billion sesterces in the Treasury. I have no idea whether that is a lot of money, but 3 billion of anything sounds like quite a lot. He was clearly a man who knew what he was doing. I understand that he achieved that by limiting his wars with neighbouring factions and ensuring that he operated a good diplomatic policy. Perhaps those are other Conservative principles that we can adopt more these days.

Now, why am I going on about this? It is because the tax-free threshold in 2010 was £6,745, and this party is now going to increase it to £12,500. I believe that I represent the most deprived constituency represented by a Conservative MP, so it is incredibly important to my constituents that they will now find themselves £1,200 a year better off. That will have a significant impact on their lives. How many of them are there? The House of Commons Library could not give me specific details, but it told me that approximately 499,000 people will be taken out of the tax bracket because of that change, and 8% of taxpayers are in the west midlands, so that translates to approximately 40,000 people in the west midlands who will not be paying tax as a result of this above-inflation increase for the year 2019-20. For the following year, 2020-21, there will be a further 12,500 people in the west midlands not paying tax. That is hugely significant.
The Mayor for the west midlands, Andy Street, welcomed the Budget as “a £100 million vote of confidence” in the west midlands. Why would he say that? It is because approximately £70 million is being given to transport infrastructure across the region, and a further £20 million is being given to help the region to cement its position as a global leader for connected and electric vehicles. That is the future and it is very exciting to see. This Government are making sure that they link up elements of policy. There will be taxation changes for businesses that provide electric charging points at work. Clearly, there is more to be done. In order for people to adopt the new technology, they will need to be able to charge electric vehicles very frequently, so we need to make sure that there are charging points in many convenient locations, but this is certainly a step in the right direction.

The other measure I welcome for my constituents is the stamp duty relief for first-time buyers. I understand that for the previous financial year 270 of my constituents benefited from that relief to the tune of approximately £1,100 each. Again, that is no small potatoes for my constituents. The Government are continuing to support my constituents and to leave the money in their pockets so they can choose where best to spend it.

I encourage the Treasury Front-Bench team to adopt Tiberius’s maxim and continue to shear the sheep, not skin them—it is good Conservative policy.

9.10 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), although I sometimes wonder how one can follow that. It was certainly very interesting.

I want to touch on a point made by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I congratulate him on receiving Royal Assent for his private Member’s Bill. It was good to see in the Red Book that the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018 is moving forward. He spoke at length about business; I know he is a doughty champion for that. He would do well to look at what the SNP Government in Scotland have done in lifting 100,000 small businesses out of business rates since 2008. They have been doing that for 10 years, so the Scottish Conservatives can come north on occasion to see that.

I rise to support the reasoned amendment in the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and other hon. Friends from the Scottish National party. As the Bill derives from the Chancellor’s recent Budget, I want to make a couple of comments more widely about the Budget—and what was missing from it—before moving on to talk specifically about clause 3.

One minor benefit of not being able to speak in the Budget debate was that I had time during the weekend that followed to take the temperature of my constituents concerning the Budget. The general feeling on Shettleston Road is that austerity is far from over, and that is something that my hon. Friends and I hear week in, week out at our Friday surgeries. The Budget in fact prolongs austerity. The Prime Minister said that austerity was coming to an end, but the Budget failed every single test when it comes to the claim that the end of austerity is now in sight.

For example, there were no transitional measures to support the WASPI women, such as Anne Dalziel from Garrowhill. Anne received no notice from the DWP about the changes to her state pension age and is one of the many women in this country who have been shafted time and again by the British Government. To give an example of just how arbitrary the changes are, Anne has friends who were also born in 1953 and they received their state pension in 2016, but because Anne was born on 23rd December, her pension age was deferred three years to 2019. There were no measures in the Budget to help Anne Dalziel, and it is little wonder that the WASPI women in the Gallery staged their protest in the way they did. They have wholehearted support on these Benches.

Likewise, there were no measures in the Budget to halt and fix the roll-out of universal credit, which is due to be unleashed on my constituency next month and will undoubtedly cause social and financial misery just in time for Christmas. The amazing work that has been done by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) on Inverness, where universal credit has already been rolled out, shows the deep damage it has caused. The fact that the Government will not listen to my hon. Friends and halt the roll-out of universal credit in Glasgow, especially at Christmas, shows how mean they are.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend’s constituents, like mine, visit Shettleston job centre. Does it concern him as much as it concerns me that someone making a claim there on the first day universal credit rolls out—5 December—will not be entitled to any money until 9 January?

David Linden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, one reason that we share that jobcentre is that the British Government, in their wisdom, closed Bridgeton jobcentre in her constituency, in addition to closing Parkhead jobcentre and another six jobcentres in the city of Glasgow. Although Conservative Members paint a rosy picture about the work they are doing in their local communities, the work we see in Glasgow shows that they are absolutely out of touch and are pulling the rug from under our constituents’ feet.

Clauses 61 and 62 address gaming duty. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) has campaigned on fixed odds betting terminals. Like other hon. and right hon. Members, I was genuinely sorry to see the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) resign from the Government, but she was right to do so. The reality is that fixed odds betting terminals have become a massive public health issue in our constituencies. I see that in Baillieston Main Street, where we have three betting shops lined up next to each other. The proliferation of these terminals is undoubtedly one of the worst things for public health. Whether it is the knock-on effect of depression, debt or even suicide, it is clear that fixed odds betting terminals need to be considered through the prism of public health, and not Treasury revenue.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government moved to delay the stake reduction until October 2019 after a report by KPMG was circulated in the Treasury? KPMG has said that the report was written to meet the specific terms
David Linden: My hon. Friend has been campaigning on this for far longer than I have, and he has a strong track record of pursuing the issue.

David Linden: The hon. Gentleman’s intervention comes before ten o’clock, which is quite unusual. In all seriousness, he is absolutely spot on. We all know the considerable influence of the DUP when it comes to marching through the Lobby with the Government. What he has said tonight should be heard on the Treasury Bench. The Government cannot count on the support of the DUP when it comes to delaying the reduction in the maximum stake from £100 to £2, which should send a very strong message.

I believe that in the coming days and weeks we will see a groundswell of support not just among Opposition Members but among Conservative Members, too, because this is not, and should not be, a party political issue. This is an issue of public health, and hopefully the Government will see sense in the coming weeks and not try to have a fight on the Floor of the House, but do the right thing by our communities.

On the so-called national living wage, the under-25s were, yet again, mugged by this Government. They are still excluded from the national living wage, which in itself is simply a con trick. The national living wage is not a real living wage, and it falls far short of the true living wage set by the independent Living Wage Foundation.

Over the course of the debate so far, and I suspect over the course of the evening to come, we have heard Scottish Tories say how wonderful this Budget is, but I challenge those Members: whether it is in Banff and Buchan, Bannockburn or Prestwick, can they seriously, from that point of view, the change needs to come sooner. The industry has had plenty of time to sort it out; it does not need more time.

The simple fact of the matter is that the longer we wait to implement this measure, the more damage is being inflicted on the most vulnerable people in our society. Some 43% of the people using fixed odds betting terminals are either problem or at-risk gamblers, and when we consider that 230,000 sessions on these machines in a single year results in a loss of more than £1,000 each session, we see that any further delay in reducing the maximum stake to £2 is not justifiable in societal terms. It is also not justifiable in terms of the time that is really powers to do so. Seven in 10 taxpayers in Scotland will pay less tax this year than they paid in 2017-18 on a given income, but it is right that those on higher incomes—that includes us as Members of Parliament—should pay a modest amount more in tax. I am perfectly comfortable with that as a concept because I know that investment in housing and in decent public services cannot be done on the cheap. It is right that those of us who earn higher salaries should pay a little more to support better public services for the good of everyone in society and our communities. But what is before us today gives tax cuts to high earners and that is just not right.

In essence, this Bill was about choices for the British Government. They have chosen to give tax cuts to high earners and to do nothing for the WASPI women; they have chosen not to give under-25s equality and a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work; they have chosen to plough ahead with universal credit, despite it being fundamentally flawed and leading to reductions in household incomes; and they have chosen to perpetuate austerity right across these islands. But the Chancellor is not the only person with choices to make because, with each passing day, the people of Scotland are realising that they, too, will soon have a choice to make. They can choose to stay in an inherently unequal, unfair United Kingdom which is riddled with austerity and heading over the cliff edge of a hard Brexit, or they can choose an independent Scotland free from the obsession with austerity economics that so epitomises this Finance Bill. It is for that reason that I cannot support the Bill this evening.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to listen to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who treats the House to the usual rendition of references agreed with the Association of British Bookmakers. Does he agree that the Government should take this opportunity to move swiftly to implement a £2 maximum stake in April 2019?

The simple fact of the matter is that the longer we wait to implement this measure, the more damage is being inflicted on the most vulnerable people in our society. Some 43% of the people using fixed odds betting terminals are either problem or at-risk gamblers, and when we consider that 230,000 sessions on these machines in a single year results in a loss of more than £1,000 each session, we see that any further delay in reducing the maximum stake to £2 is not justifiable in societal terms. It is also not justifiable in terms of the time that is really powers to do so. Seven in 10 taxpayers in Scotland will pay less tax this year than they paid in 2017-18 on a given income, but it is right that those on higher incomes—that includes us as Members of Parliament—should pay a modest amount more in tax. I am perfectly comfortable with that as a concept because I know that investment in housing and in decent public services cannot be done on the cheap. It is right that those of us who earn higher salaries should pay a little more to support better public services for the good of everyone in society and our communities. But what is before us today gives tax cuts to high earners and that is just not right.

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needed to make this adjustment happen. It is not justifiable in terms of the ongoing social costs, with the misery that occurs when individuals lose control of their decision-making faculty to a gambling addiction. And I simply cannot accept, on the grounds of any sort of morality that I would wish to be associated with, that the special pleading of the betting firms should take any sort of a priority over the damage inflicted on society, on families and on children by those who are suffering from gambling addiction and for whom these machines are an outlet.

The startling statistic is that for every second of every day these machines cost their players £57 in losses. There are 33,000 of these fixed odds betting terminals in betting shops across the UK. A helpful live ready-reckoner on the website of the all-party group on fixed odds betting terminals calculates to the second how much has been lost on these machines since the Government first called for evidence on what the maximum stake for these terminals should be. That happened way back in October 2016, and the last time I checked, which was earlier today—so after 749 days—this figure is in excess of £3.7 billion. I am not prepared to stand by—I could not do so as a matter of conscience—and do nothing when action is required. The Government have already accepted that that action is necessary and described these machines in the most disparaging terms, so I ask simply that the measure be implemented in April, at the soonest point.

Perhaps a justification will be put forward that somehow it will cost the Treasury lost revenue, but at what price? Are we really saying that there is not a more productive use for these billions of pounds of economic activity in our country? I think that there is. We should not underestimate the devastating effects of the vice-like grip of an addiction such as gambling. The Government should act now to do what they have already resolved to do—not in 12 months’ time, but by April next year at the very latest.

Jim Shannon: Is it not a fact that the sector and industry have had 18 months to get themselves ready for this? They knew it was coming and should have got their house in order. They do not need any more time.

Stephen Kerr: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. Reference has already been made to the KPMG report, which was provided at the instigation of the Association of British Bookmakers. KPMG itself advised that that report “should not therefore be regarded as suitable to be used or relied on by any other person or for any other purpose” because its terms and scope were determined by KPMG’s client, the Association of British Bookmakers. Paddy Power Betfair wrote to the Prime Minister because it was so shocked that the report could be used as a credible source for decision-making, saying that some of the assumptions in it were unrealistic.

Overcoming addiction is not simply a matter of exercising willpower. Addiction robs people of the power to decide for themselves. We in this House have the power to take the necessary measures that will protect the most vulnerable people, the most vulnerable families and the children of those families. I very much hope that the Government will take the decision to do that earlier.

9.27 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I was accused earlier by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) of being a bit miserable in my Budget speech—of failing to point out the good things in the Budget. Well, it is pretty easy to be miserable with a miserable Budget, but I did welcome the freeze on whisky duty and the support for electric vehicles, among other things. There were slim pickings, but I did my best to be positive wherever I possibly could. But how rich is it to hear that accusation from those on the Government Benches? They would rather turn to stone than welcome the fact that Scotland’s crime level is at a 42-year low; welcome the best accident and emergency performance in the UK; or welcome that 100,000 small and medium-sized businesses pay no business rates at all, thanks to the Scottish Government’s small business bonus. And what about the 70% of people in Scotland who are now paying less tax, or the lowest-paid people who are paying less tax? Or our record social house building programme, with council houses being put in place to fill the Government’s deficit?

It is clear for all to see that austerity lives on for those who can least afford it. In delivering this Bill, the Government continue their attacks on the poorest in our society. In my response to the Budget, I recounted many ways in which the Government are failing to deliver for Scotland—for our workers, industry and people. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said earlier that the Chancellor admitted that the Government would need to look at “a different approach” on the economy; if and when the Prime Minister fails to secure a deal with the European Union, this Bill will not be worth the vellum it is printed on.

After a decade, Tory austerity is far from over. Scotland’s block grant for 2019-20 is down £2 billion in real terms compared with 2010-2011. The paltry £2.7 billion for universal credit does nothing for people currently struggling and goes nowhere near reversing the years and billions of pounds of social security cuts that people have endured. After five and a half years of this failed experiment in the highlands, after seeing the misery that people have endured on universal credit in Inverness and the surrounding area, and after having ignored not just me but all the agencies, including the Government’s own support agencies, this Government should hang their heads in shame that they are not doing something to help people instead of continuing to punish them in this way.

In contrast, the Scottish Government are helping those on low and modest incomes. This Tory Budget gives tax cuts to the richest. The Scottish Government, in the face of austerity, are building an economy of the future, with measures to unlock innovation and productivity. They do that while the Government in Westminster recklessly pursue, at the very best, a bad Brexit for the nations of the UK—actually it is looking more like a disaster that they are pursuing. The Tories should accept that the only way to minimise the damage to jobs, the economy and business is to stay in the customs union and the single market.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North asked earlier, where is the oil and gas sector deal? After £350 billion in tax revenues, the industry deserves better;
it needs the sector deal. The news of yet another nuclear failure with the withdrawal of Toshiba underlines the fix that this Government are in over their Paris climate change commitments. Having betrayed Peterhead and having pulled the rug from under the industry three years ago, incidentally wasting £100 million in the process, this Government must now make a proper serious commitment to carbon capture and storage.

**Drew Hendry** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming the commitment of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy not only in at least considering the sector deal for oil and gas, but, on the subject of carbon capture and storage, in looking at a project in St Fergus, just off the coast of Peterhead in my constituency. It looks like being part of a Scotland-wide cluster, because the system is already connected by a pipeline from St Fergus to Grangemouth.

Drew Hendry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Indeed, I do welcome the work at St Fergus. It perhaps would have been proper to point out that the Scottish Government are also driving that St Fergus development. It perhaps also would have been appropriate to point out that the funding that has been put forward by BEIS is one tenth of what was removed three years ago. Three years after the point at which it could have taken advantage of world-leading cutting-edge technology, it thinks it is good enough to put in a tenth of the funds and hope that that lip service will pay dividends. It just will not wash.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Drew Hendry: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

This Government also continue to fail the young. [Interruption.] Thank you for that direction, Mr Speaker. I will do my best to keep the pace going.

This Government also continue to fail young people. They could have ended wage discrimination, but they chose instead to keep punishing them. Those young people deserve the same pay for the same work and they deserve a real living wage. As my colleagues pointed out earlier, there is nothing—nothing—for the women born in the 1950s who were short-changed on their pension entitlements. It is no wonder that the argument for an independent Scotland has never been stronger. The Tories’ obsessions make the case for us in Scotland.

I do want to refer to the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), because we rarely agree on anything, but the one thing that we do agree on tonight is fixed odds betting terminals. Delaying the reduction of stakes in fixed odds betting terminals is a disgrace; it will only take more money from vulnerable addicts and put it in the pockets of the bookies and those with vested interests. It is a disgrace that is felt right across this House. Research from Landman Economics has shown that the average fixed odds betting terminal user loses £19.2 a month, with the average user of a machine capped at £2 a spin losing just £22 by comparison. There is no justification for delaying this action.

It is also clear, from this very debate, how the Tories want to muddy the waters on tax avoidance, as they have on the IR35 changes. If they are not pointing the way to tax avoidance, even when they look to clamp down on it they miss the mark, as we can see with the implementation of the IR35 changes. The loopholes absolutely need to be closed. However, the employment agencies benefiting most from these schemes have, for the most part, got away with it. With HMRC implementing stringent measures on many who were duped, many are now fearful of being forced to repay immediately with no provisions that reasonable time will be allowed and a payment scheme be made available. Folk are genuinely worried about becoming bankrupt.

Austerity lives on for those who can afford it least. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor spin the line that austerity has ended, or is ending; well, maybe, depending on who you hear it from. But everyone knows, even their rare supporters, dwindling though they are, that that is just a toom tabard of a statement—another Government rebranding exercise. My constituents are making the choice between putting food on their tables and heating their homes. They have had enough of it. Those on universal credit with spiralling debt because they do not know when the next payment is coming, or whether, if it does, it will be correct, have had enough of it.

Universal credit impacts on other communities. After five and a half years, we know the truth. As the OBR Budget document details, the changes to the work allowance reverse only half of the cut that was made to it in the 2015 Budget. Are we seriously expected to cheer this Government for putting back in less than half of what they removed, after years of punishing those who could afford it least? Millions of people have been dragged through this system already, with misery, heartache and poverty—and what have they been told? They have been told that the system works—that they are all wrong—but there are now voices joining theirs.

Even in the Minister’s small concessions, he is admitting this Government’s failure. They should be utterly ashamed of what they have inflicted on people. If Ministers had a shred of decency, they would come to the Dispatch Box and apologise to my constituents and to the far too many others who have had to endure the roll-out of universal credit. Let us not forget that these people will not be benefiting from transitional funding announced in the Budget; instead they are left trying to piece together their lives following the impact on their families, sometimes shattered by this move. They are left wondering how on earth a Government supposed to provide them with a safety net to which they and their families have contributed are left counting pennies while those who have the most still avoid paying their share.

For those to be transitioned to universal credit, £1 billion for the transition does not even touch the sides of what is needed. If this Government were serious about mitigating the impacts, they would migrate people to universal credit without expecting them to process a new application. People who need universal credit support simply do not have anything spare to get them through the transition weeks, be it two weeks or five weeks.

Then there is the new funding for universal support to be announced. I will welcome that; any support is better than none. But again it is more fudge, because, as anyone who has any idea about this mess knows, most of the issues people experience with universal credit are long-running and ongoing well after the initial application. So where is the fund for ongoing universal support?
While that was omitted from this Bill and by this Government’s PR machine, the chief executive of Citizen’s Advice made it very clear in her letter to the Work and Pensions Committee when she said: “Our current agreement does not include funding to provide support to people once their claim is complete.”

Of course, I hear the Government’s other rhetoric that for most people the process is simple and problem free.

I do not want to see any more people in tears in my constituency office. I do not want to see any more families struggling to get along. I do not want to see any more families going to food banks and having to prostrate themselves to get what is essentially a handout in order to keep them going when they should be properly protected under a decent social security system that any forward-thinking country would have. Perhaps that country should indeed be an independent Scotland.

9.39 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), who always paints such an uplifting picture of the country for the House.

It seems to me that the people I represent in my constituency know that the best cure for deprivation is a job. There is no doubt that this Government have had massive success in creating so many jobs since they have been in office. That is in sharp contrast to the toxic inheritance left by the previous Government.

The ultimate test of any Finance Bill is: what path does it set for the future of the country and what vision does it set for the next steps? Yes, the people I represent in Dover and Deal know that we have done well in creating jobs and creating new prosperity, but it is also important that we are a compassionate party and that we care for and look after the least well-off. It goes beyond just getting a job; it is important that we reduce the burden of taxation on those who are the least well-off.

That is why it is so important that the personal allowance has been increased to £12,500. I have long argued—since 2010—that we should increase the personal allowance and take people out of taxation altogether. I am really glad that we have come to a time when it is at such a high level. That is good for the least well-paid and good for taking people out of tax altogether.

I welcome the measures on universal credit. It is welcome that the Chancellor has listened carefully to the representations made by me and many other Conservative Members that we should look after those who are the least well-off. In many ways, universal credit improvements and the better funding of universal credit is the best way to reduce the incidence of taxation on the least well-off. It is the most targeted way of helping people, and I welcome that.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that properly funded universal credit and taking the lowest-paid out of tax are important, but does he agree with me that the billions of pounds we are going to spend giving the top 10% a tax cut would have been better spent on the low earners he mentions?

Charlie Elphicke: I am going to come on to that in one moment, but I will just finish this point.

When talking about the importance of compassionate Conservatism and the vision we as the Conservative party should have of looking after the least well-off, it can never be right to put jobs ahead of people’s lives. That has been well settled on the Conservative Benches. Let us not forget that it was on these Benches that important legislation such as the Ten Hours Act was pioneered well over a century and a half ago. It was on these Benches that so much of our health and safety legislation was pioneered and put through. It was on these Benches that we made the argument that jobs should never come ahead of people’s lives.

That is why I join my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), who spoke movingly some moments ago, in saying that we cannot delay the action that is needed on fixed odds betting terminals beyond next April. It cannot be right to delay this, and it certainly cannot be right to do so on the basis of a bogus report. It has been said explicitly that that was not what the report was intended to be for or to do.

For that reason, we need to come together as a House and collectively persuade the Government to think again and accept that we should bring this in from April 2019, as has long been planned. In my constituency of Dover and Deal, addiction is a big problem for many people. Whether it is to alcohol, drugs or gambling, addiction is a big problem. It is the responsibility of this House—and, in my view, this has long been settled as a responsibility of compassionate Conservatism—to look after and care for those who suffer from addiction, so I think it is the right thing to do.

It is important that this is not simply about protecting the least well-off, helping them to have more money and protecting them from exploitation, but about making sure that we can power ahead as a country. It is important that powering ahead as a country is at the heart of this Bill. We need to get big business investing, because it has not been investing; it is sitting on about £750 billion of cash balances. We need to get big business investing, because it does not make any sense to protect small businesses from being exploited by the oligopoly of big banks.

It is also important that we back the entrepreneurs—the job creators. Who are they? The figures are clear. Since 2000, 4 million jobs have been created by small and medium-sized enterprises, whereas big business has created only 800,000. The obvious thing to do is to back small businesses—the entrepreneurs—with tax cuts and deregulation and by making it easier for them to get on and do well. That is why it would never be right to increase taxes on small businesses, because that would hold people back. It would never be right to increase the regulatory burden on small businesses, because that would make it harder for them to succeed. Nor would it be right to allow big banks to prey on small businesses and to litigate them into bankruptcy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) movingly said in his speech. That is why we need to ensure that there is a financial tribunal system to protect small businesses from being exploited by the oligopoly of big banks.
While we are about it, we ought to think about putting the consumer back in charge and back in the driving seat, by taking action to break up the big energy companies and the big banking oligopoly. We should make sure that we have more competition in this country. We should unbundle Openreach to ensure that we have much better, faster internet access. It is a disgrace the way Openreach carries on, cutting off villages. However, it does not just do that; when people change connection, half the time they have to wait half a month for the connection to be made, because of Openreach’s galactic incompetence. The company is more interested in investing in sports rights than in infrastructure; indeed, it does invest more in sports rights than in its infrastructure, and that has to change as well. If it were a stand-alone company, I am absolutely certain that that would be the case.

So, yes, the Conservative party should be the party of enterprise and of the small businesses that drive the economy, that create the jobs and that have created the jobs over the last 15 years. Yes, we should be the party of compassion for the least well-off. Then, however, I am challenged by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who says, “Should you not be in favour of increasing taxes on the richest, on businesses and all the rest of it?”

Gareth Snell: I fear that the hon. Gentleman is misrepresenting what I said. I did not say that the Government should be raising taxes; they should simply not be cutting taxes, which is a very different thing.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman seems to be muddled: is he a tax raiser or a tax cutter? It seems to me that the evidence of history is really clear. Back in 2006, I wrote a paper for the Centre for Policy Studies saying that we should halve the rate of corporation tax, which then stood at over 30%. I basically said that that would pay for itself, because if we cut the rate, we up the take. I made the case that we would have more revenues than were coming in at the time if we halved the rate to less than 20%. Since then, that policy has been put into action, and that has turned out to be the case: if we cut the rate, we up the take. In the 1980s, they cut the higher rate of tax from 80% to 60% and then to 40%. Each time the rate was cut, what happened? The tax take rose. That is why we ought to be looking at how we can reduce the burden of taxation in areas where we can raise more taxes.

There are some cases where we increase the burden of taxation and see revenues falling. We can see that in what has happened with stamp duty land tax on very high-value properties: we freeze the market, and we see lower revenues as a result.

Alan Brown: If cutting taxes always brings in more revenue, how come every measure in the Red Book on cutting tax shows that it will cost the taxpayer money? Either the Treasury does not know what it is doing in its predictions, or it is putting cause and effect together wrongly.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman actually makes a very fair point. The Treasury has a classic modelling system. I have always argued for a dynamic modelling system and the history books are on my side. The dynamic modelling system is the right way forward. It is the right approach to take, because history teaches us that if we reduce the rate of taxation, the revenues go up. That is elementary. That is obvious. Everyone on the Conservative Benches understands that. That is well settled: it was settled back in the 1980s.

It is important that we are compassionate and that we care for the least well off. Having a steady economy, with increased jobs and increased prosperity means that we have more money to invest in public services. However, we also need to invest and support the entrepreneurs—the job creators. We need to be on the side of the consumer and ensure more competition in a more dynamic economy. Finally, we need to embrace the industries of the future. Let me talk briefly about electric cars.

Why is the adoption of electric cars so slow? The answer is that people are worried about their car conking out and being stranded in the middle of nowhere. We need a step-change in how we manage infrastructure and charging points. We need to make sure that infrastructure is not just in people’s workplaces, which is welcome, but across the land. Until that happens, there will not be the mass adoption of electric cars. We need to make that more viable and possible, because then big company car fleets will go electric. As soon as they do, that will cascade through the marketplace. The one thing we need to do more work on—the Treasury needs to do more work on—it—is getting more investment in infrastructure for charging and electric cars. That way offers a real chance for our country to be less polluted so that the air we breathe is cleaner and our environment is better as well as ending our addiction to fossil fuels and our dependence on unstable countries around the world, thereby enjoying much greater energy security here in Britain.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I am pleased to speak in support of the measures in the Bill. I have previously spoken of a number of reservations about some of its measures. I wish to record my disappointment at the timetable for changes to fixed odds betting terminals. I believe the wait is too long. We can take some comfort from the fact that, while the Government did not oversee their introduction, it is this Government who will see the stake plummet to £2, but not on a timescale that I would have wished for.

I believe the Bill is well matched to our nation’s present circumstances and will do much to benefit my constituents in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock. Scotland will benefit from the personal allowance being increased by the UK Chancellor to £12,500. That is almost double what it was when we came into power. The Scottish Government do not set that allowance, but they do set the tax bands, which are more numerous. We hear often that there is a tax saving for a certain band. That is indeed correct: it amounts to £24 a year for some, which equates to less than 50p a week—not over-generous. The Scottish Government have it within their gift to vary the tax rates and thresholds of non-savings and non-dividend income for Scottish taxpayers. I await with interest their budget next month, which will be a challenge for the Scottish Government. [Interruption.] Every budget is a challenge. My personal budget is a challenge. Presently, Scotland is the highest taxed part of the UK for income tax and the highest taxed part of the UK in which to run a business.
Kirsty Blackman: What does the hon. Gentleman say to the half of English taxpayers who would pay less tax if they were to live in Scotland?

Bill Grant: I take the hon. Lady’s point, but I understand that the saving she refers to is very modest to the tune of £24 a year for some, which equates to less than 50p a week. It is a step in the right direction, but a very small step and hardly a progressive tax system. As one whose mother cleaned other people’s houses and made beds at Butlin’s on Saturdays, I am not minded to accept lectures on poverty from Scottish National party Members.

I disagree with the suggestion that the Budget failed to provide funding for a social security system that treats people with dignity and respect. The Chancellor was listening. The entire ethos of the evidence-based and empowering system of universal credit is that work should always pay, and that work brings with it dignity and respect. No one can disagree with that. The dignity of work is important to all constituents in all parts of the United Kingdom.

The Bill will facilitate an additional £1.7 billion per annum being invested to increase work allowances by £1,000 from April 2019. I hear Opposition Members cry “More!” Everyone’s an Oliver—they want more, more. That “more” has to be earned and this Government have an economy that works and is earning more.

Drew Hendry: Come to Inverness.

Bill Grant: I am happy to join you.

Some 2.4 million households will keep an extra £630 of income per annum, and I am sure that those who need support will continue to receive it. It is no longer a wicked system where if someone wants to work beyond the 16 hours, they lose money.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman says that it is no longer a wicked system, but it is a wicked system for those who have more than two children. Why does he think it is justifiable to take so much money out of the mouths of kids in his constituency?

Bill Grant: The system is set, and it is what is affordable to the taxpayer. You have to plan your children and what you can afford to bring up, as I planned—[Interruption.] It is not a crime to plan—[Interruption.] It is not a crime to plan your children and how you manage those children, and whether you have one—[Interruption.] That is the choice of the individual; it is not the choice of Government.

Alison Thewliss: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that this benefit will apply to all children, regardless of when they were born, and could not reasonably have been planned for from next year? Is he also further aware that the social security system is supposed to be a safety net for us all and not meant to punish people for the circumstances they are in?

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that intervention—I do not agree with what she says. It is a safety net—it is a security net. My family have benefited from it. Nobody is saying they want to dismantle the welfare system. It has to be a manageable and affordable welfare system for the taxpayer and it must support the individual, as it does—[Interruption.] Thank you very much.
The tragedy—the real, genuine tragedy—for those of us who were here in 2010 to listen to the emergency Budget that began austerity is that it simply has not worked. The British public have had all the pain, only to find out that there is no gain. I urge anyone who has participated in this debate to reread George Osborne’s speech in that 2010 Budget, because we know that the deficit was not eradicated by 2015 and that the retention of the triple A rating, said in that debate to be sacrosanct, does not even get a mention in a ministerial speech these days. Instead, economic growth is now the lowest in the post-war era and UK business investment the lowest in the G7. We have had eight years not even of stagnant wages, but of falling wages.

With respect, are these not the fundamentals? When we discuss a Finance Bill, should these factors—the ones that impact directly on our constituents—not be the ones we focus on? Eight years of austerity have left too many people in this country poorer, unsafe and too uncertain of their futures. It was a reckless policy that in my view directly contributed to the result of the Brexit referendum. The further chaos the Government now find themselves in. I want a Finance Bill that properly addresses these things and puts them right, but instead we have a Finance Bill that does none of these things, a Bill that offers the country nothing new—and in some areas nothing at all.

I second the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) about the way the Government have gone about the whole process of presenting the Bill. It might sound like parliamentary chicanery, but it is important. In an unprecedented move the Government did not allow us to table real amendments to the Finance Bill. By failing to move an amendment to the law resolution, they have limited the scope of amendments and new clauses only to the subject matter of the resolutions already tabled by the Government. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) referenced this in her speech. In doing so, they have limited the rights of every Member, Conservative Back-Bench Members included.

This procedure has only been used by Chancellors six times in the last century and only when a Finance Bill was tabled close to an election: Churchill in 1929, Healey in 1974, Brown in 1997, Osborne in 2010 and the current Chancellor last year in 2017—probably the only time the Chancellor has been mentioned in the same breath as Churchill. We know why these restrictions have been applied. The Government are running scared of the House of Commons and, most of all, their own Back Benchers and perhaps their allies in the Democratic Unionist party.

Time and again, the Government have used the Brexit process as a pretext for a power grab, transferring powers to the Executive without any thought for constitutional checks and balances. I ask hon. Members to have a look at clause 89, rather innocently named, “Minor amendments in consequence of EU withdrawal”.

That said, I have, as ever, enjoyed listening to today’s debate. We have had some good speeches and the usual box of slightly spurious claims and downright incorrect statements from the Government Benches. It seems we will never get Government Members to listen to the IFS on the cost of their corporation tax cuts, but it also seems that the Financial Secretary, whom we are all tremendously fond of, has chosen today to repeat his claim that unemployment rose under every Labour Government. I am afraid that, unfortunately for him, that is just not true.

While listening to the debate, I have taken the liberty of doing some research for the Financial Secretary. I can tell him that he need look no further than the very first Labour Government, who took office in January 1924. There was a general election in December of that year, something we are not in favour of. The very first Labour Government reduced unemployment from 11.9% to 10.9%: those figures are widely available. It is true that the Labour Government of 1945 had to deal with demobilisation following the end of the second world war, but they did find the national health service, build a million homes and still satisfy the legal definition of full employment, so I think we can say that they were the greatest Government in British history.

I must also place on record that the claim made by the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty)—I am not sure whether he is still in the Chamber—about the book edited by the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), is simply not correct. I think that the hon. Gentleman was trying to quote the economist Simon Wren-Lewis, who accused the Prime Minister of lying when she gave a similar quote in the House of Commons. I ask for that to be recognised and I ask Members to reflect on its incorrect use.

Several Conservative Members referred to the increase in NHS spending. I felt that there was a slight lack of recognition of the fact that it is predicated purely on an improved forecast for the tax revenues. It is not money in the bank and, remarkably, the Chancellor chose to blow most of it in one go. That may not have been prudent.

I listened intently to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). He said many things that I thought were fundamentally wrong about Brexit and tax policy, but he did make some interesting comments about monetary policy. There has, I feel, been insufficient recognition that austerity has been accompanied by an unprecedented period of ultra-loose monetary policy. The Bank of England cut interest rates to record lows, and then introduced quantitative easing as a form of “life support” when they could not go any lower. We have not discussed that enough, and we have certainly not discussed enough the distributional impact that it implies.

The Bank has essentially compensated for Government austerity by pumping money into the economy to increase consumption and investment, while the Government have done the opposite. We would say that the lack of sustained growth under the Government’s stewardship has meant that we have not yet been able to unwind that policy, so that, in effect, if we need it again it is not available to us. That is why, today, we are even more badly placed to deal with the next recession, when it comes.
As ever, I was slightly frustrated by the speeches of the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and others who made no distinction between Government borrowing for investment and Government borrowing to pay for day-to-day spending. As the International Monetary Fund itself has pointed out, if debt is accrued to finance investment, and if that investment will generate stronger tax revenues than the cost of borrowing, it is entirely sustainable. Debt as a percentage of GDP does not tell us much without reference to when that debt needs to be serviced, and at what cost, relative to the growth of taxes that have to pay for it. The public finances are not like a household’s finances, and every Member needs to remember that. The worst legacy for the next generation is a failure to grow the economy as we could. It is nonsense to talk about burdening future generations with debt when they are exactly the ones who would benefit from that long-term investment.

Some excellent speeches were made by Labour Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) made an important speech about housing and homelessness. She emphasised that, apart from increasing first-time buyers relief, the Bill does little to encourage house building or to tackle the UK’s housing crisis. As she said, many of the Government’s initiatives, such as Help to Buy, cause substantial problems in themselves. She also updated the House on the Grenfell situation, and I pay tribute to her for all her work on behalf of her constituents and the nation in that regard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) spoke with passion about what austerity has done to living standards in this country. There is no better example of that than the impact of universal credit. Let us not forget that the £1.7 billion promised for universal credit is only a third of the £7 billion cuts in the social security system that were already scheduled. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) made that point well. Let me tell Conservative Members, with complete sincerity, that I am kept awake at night by the casework that I receive on universal credit, and I do not believe that I am the only one.

Chris Philp: Does the shadow Minister accept the Resolution Foundation’s analysis, published after the Budget, that said that the total fiscal cost of the amended universal credit will exceed that of the preceding benefits? That is, more money is going into universal credit now than even was the case before.

Jonathan Reynolds: I have seen that analysis. The Resolution Foundation said that the cost is greater, so the question for the hon. Gentleman is this: if more money is going in and so many people are still losing out, what terrible choices have the Government made to produce a situation as bad as that?

My hon. Friend the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned the Government’s shameful delay in limiting the maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals. Many Members, including me, see the damage done in our constituencies by these machines every week. They both gave forceful and persuasive speeches, but I am hopeful that the will of the House on this matter is clear and that the Government will be forced to do the right thing, especially given several speeches by Conservative Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) gave a powerful testimony about what austerity has meant in his borough. I only hope that his school governors’ meeting was quorate without him.

There was a lively exchange on the environment. I do not think it is unreasonable to say that, given the potential catastrophe we face—as outlined in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report published in October—this Finance Bill is unsatisfactory. I sat in Mansion House in June, listening to the Chancellor promise that the UK would be leading the way on green finance, but we have yet to see any tangible evidence of the Government’s intentions on the statute book. We are lagging behind our European counterparts, which already have mandatory climate disclosure laws, and those that have issued their own sovereign green bonds. This just does not seem to be a priority for the Government.

The good news for all my colleagues is that they can join me tonight in voting for Labour’s reasoned amendment, which declines to give this Bill its Second Reading on the basis that it continues the austerity policies that have caused so much damage, and instead proposes a progressive taxation system, real funding for public services, greater public investment and a halt to the roll-out of universal credit.

I say to colleagues across the whole House, is it really unreasonable in Britain today for people to want to take their children into a city centre without having to explain to them why so many people are now sleeping on the streets? Is it really unreasonable to believe that, if we really had a strong economy, thousands of our fellow citizens would not be dependent on food banks to get by? And is it really unreasonable to believe that, when a Government present a Finance Bill, their priorities should be those most in need, not those who are already better off? We do not think that any of those things are unreasonable, so we will vote against the Finance Bill tonight. We know that this country does not just need new ideas; it needs new hope for the future. The Bill sadly offers neither and it does not deserve the endorsement of the House tonight.

10.12 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members across the House who have contributed to this wide-ranging debate. The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury managed the unusual feat of opening the debate without mentioning a single measure in the Finance Bill, although he did brandish a very thin pamphlet, which we were told contained all the answers to the Labour party’s spending commitments. A number of important issues have been raised across the House tonight, and I will do my best in the time available—and as swiftly as possible—to respond to as many as I can.

Two weeks ago, the Chancellor was able to present a Budget that followed five years of economic growth, with the deficit cut by four fifths, the lowest levels of unemployment, the highest levels of employment in my lifetime, real wages rising and real wages rising fastest among the lowest paid. It was a Budget in which, as a result of responsible management of the public finances—meeting the serious challenges we inherited in 2010 in a serious and robust way—we were able to invest the highest levels in our economic infrastructure for more than 40 years, including £460 million more a week than the last Labour Government for our roads, railways and broadband.
The Budget increased funding to the NHS by £20.5 billion a year in real terms; froze fuel, beer and spirits duty once again as a result of sustained lobbying and support from Members on the Government Benches, including my friends from Scotland; and—above all—provided a tax cut for 32 million people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) and for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and many other Government Members welcomed our action to support the high street and to enable town centres to adapt and evolve to new circumstances and continue to be the cornerstones of thriving communities. That action includes a reduction in business rates for 30% of smaller retailers, investment in transformation and infrastructure through the £675 million future high streets fund, and planning reforms to make it easier, cheaper and quicker to create businesses and work places in town centres and to create homes—planning reforms that are now, it seems, opposed by the Labour party.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South made an interesting suggestion about the seed enterprise investment scheme. In the Budget, we reaffirmed our commitment to the world-class incentives we have as a country to encourage investment, promote wealth creation and make this country the best place in the world to be an entrepreneur, such as continuing entrepreneurs’ relief and continuing EIS and SEIS, as my hon. Friend suggested.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and many other Government Members welcomed our sustained commitment to reducing corporation tax again—now to 17%—and noted that our decision to reduce it from 28% had not, as was suggested, reduced receipts to the Treasury, but had in fact increased them by 55%. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) made the case, as he regularly does, that we want to grow the economy and support the people out there who are creating small businesses. This Budget and this Finance Bill are for them.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way. If reducing corporation tax brings in more money, why has the Red Book never shown that, and why is the Treasury not able to provide any modelling that shows an increase in revenues from that reduction?

Robert Jenrick: I think I have already explained that the facts speak for themselves. Receipts from the reduction in corporation tax have increased by over 50%. That measure was opposed by the SNP and the Labour party.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) represents many people who work in the automotive sector, which we want to support. He asked about vehicle excise duty. In this Bill, as he knows, we are legislating to increase support for low-emission taxis and have brought that measure forward by a year.

We have also increased support for electric charge points, to help the further roll-out of electric vehicles, as other hon. Members across the House have suggested. As I discussed last week with the chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover, who supported this strongly, we intend to review the consequences of the new worldwide harmonised light vehicle test procedure on vehicle excise duty and report back in the spring.

The right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) spoke of the need to incentivise further business investment, particularly at this important moment in the Brexit negotiations. I am sure he will welcome the increase in the annual investment allowance from £200,000 to £1 million, which will encourage businesses across the country, including manufacturers, to invest in new plant, new machinery and digital technology and raise their productivity, as well as the new structures and buildings allowance, which started on Budget day.

The Budget laid out a whole range of measures—exactly the ways forward that the right hon. Gentleman suggested—to increase productivity, which is the only sustainable way to improve living standards in this country, including the largest ever investment in our strategic road network and investment in our skills base, including the introduction of T-levels, encouraging apprenticeships and the national retraining partnership.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I very much welcome the money in the Budget for repairing potholes. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that our great capital city gets its fair share of that funding?

Robert Jenrick: I certainly do. Some Opposition Members were snobby about potholes, but those of us in the real world know that potholes matter. They affect people’s working lives, and we want to fix that problem. In answer to my right hon. Friend, Barnet will shortly be receiving £690,0000 for potholes.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and many others welcomed the transferable tax history, which we announced in the Budget and which she advocated. She was strongly supported by our Scottish Conservative colleagues. The oil and gas industry is a national economic asset and one that we want to support. It supports 280,000 jobs across the Union, but particularly in north-east Scotland. In the Budget, the Chancellor reaffirmed our commitment to strong, competitive and predictable taxation, so that the industry—which is, as the hon. Lady said, still fragile—can continue to strengthen in the years ahead.

Many of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), welcomed the introduction of the increase in the personal allowance and the increase in the higher-rate threshold—a tax cut for 32 million people, more than 1.5 million more working people taken out of tax altogether and achieving an increase in the personal allowance by more than 90% since 2010, which is a promise made in our manifesto and a promise delivered in the Budget.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), as well as quoting Tiberius—I am yet to know whether Tiberius is quoted in No. 11; perhaps the Chancellor will invite my hon. Friend round for a cup of tea—was absolutely right to say that the Bill takes forward the measures in the last Budget to create a stamp duty relief for first-time buyers in other properties and extend it to those in shared ownership. That encourages and increases the dream of home ownership to a new generation.

As the Financial Secretary said at the beginning of the debate, the Bill also makes a number of changes to make our tax system fairer, and many Members across the House welcomed the new digital services tax. Some asked why we do not go further and faster, but let us
remember that we will be the first major economy to create a tax of this nature. We are genuinely leading the international community and we hope to lead a multinational agreement, but the UK, under the leadership of the Chancellor, will lead the way. With those measures and others in the Bill, we will continue to close the tax gap, which is at its lowest ever and lower than in any year of the last Labour Government.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), at the beginning of the debate, and other hon. Members later, asked what action we are taking to support the environment and on climate change. One such measure, of course, is our proposed plastics packaging tax—again, leading the world by creating an innovative tax that encourages the producers of plastic packaging to take responsibility and change their packaging, and building on great Conservative environmental taxes of the past, such as the landfill tax created by my right hon. Friend (Mr Clarke).

My hon. Friends the Members for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) and for Moray (Douglas Ross), among others, said very clearly—this is an important dividing line in British politics—that we are excited about the future of this country, and want to support and invest in science and technology and in research and development to drive the economy forward. From the Labour party, we heard no ideas as to how to grow the economy. We heard about more spending and higher taxes, but nothing about how to create wealth and make our country more prosperous. We heard only ideas that we know have failed in the past.

Let us be clear: a vote against the Bill tonight would be a vote against enabling investment and new jobs in the north-east of Scotland and a vote against the transferable tax history, which the hon. Member for Aberdeen North says she has campaigned for and advocated over many years. It would be a vote against further investment in manufacturing to raise productivity, which Opposition Members have said should be a national priority, and a vote against the increase in the annual investment allowance. It would be a vote against extending the stamp duty land tax relief for first-time buyers to those who want to live in shared-ownership properties, something advocated by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North. A year ago, the Opposition voted against our first policy in this area. Today, we know that more than 120,000 people across the country have benefited from that stamp duty relief. Surely the Labour party will not make the same mistake again.

Anyone who votes against the Finance Bill tonight will be voting against further actions to close the tax gap and to make it harder to evade and avoid taxation, and against making our tax system fairer. It would be a vote against a tax cut for 32 million people, and a vote against taking more than 1.5 million of our fellow citizens out of income tax altogether.

The Bill will make the UK more competitive, more innovative and more entrepreneurial. It will deliver lower taxes and put more money into the pockets of our British working public. It will make our economy and our country stronger, and I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.
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Finance (No. 3) Bill

12 NOVEMBER 2018

Finance (No. 3) Bill

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Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilfen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr Pat
Lammy, Mr Pat
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewins, Clinton
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahlmolbod, Mr Khalid
Mahlmolbod, 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
McMorris, Anna
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virenda
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Reanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, rh Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thombery, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Truly, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Tom
West, Katherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guti
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
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Burns, Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chisht, Rehman
Clark, Colin
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankoly, Mr Jonathan
Dockerty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
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
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frasco, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Mr Iain
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
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
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian

Tellers for the Ayes:

Vicky Foxcroft and Nic Dakin

NOES

Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
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
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frasco, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
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
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
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Tellers for the Noes:
Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 279.

Division No. 256] [10.42 pm]

AYES

Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dover-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
Evnett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Fretter, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark

Tellers for the Noes:
Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 279.

Division No. 256] [10.42 pm]

AYES

Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dover-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
Evnett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Fretter, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark

Tellers for the Noes:
Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 279.

Division No. 256] [10.42 pm]

AYES

Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dover-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
Evnett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Fretter, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark

Tellers for the Noes:
Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 279.
Tellers for the Ayes:

Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

NOES

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
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Nick
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha

Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailes
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman-Krzywydneh, Anna
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deirdre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam

Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Maik, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miler, Mrs Maria
Millling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
Murray, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poultier, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh 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, Allok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Ian
Stewart, Rory
Streater, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek

Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailes
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Woodcock, John
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
De Piero, Gloria
Debonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
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
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrellly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gelhins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Prent 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
Hansard, rh David
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
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan

Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sheriff, Paul
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen

Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thorberry, rh Emily
Timmis, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.

FINANCE (NO. 3) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Finance (No.3) Bill:

Committal

(1) The following shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House—

(a) Clauses 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 (income tax thresholds and reliefs);
(b) Clause 15 and Schedule 3 (offshore receipts in respect of intangible property);
(c) Clause 16 and Schedule 4 (avoidance involving profit fragmentation arrangements);
(d) Clause 19 (hybrid and other mismatches: scope of Chapter 8 and “financial instrument”);
(e) Clause 20 (controlled foreign companies: finance company exemption and control);
(f) Clause 22 and Schedule 7 (payment of CGT exit charges);
(g) Clause 23 and Schedule 8 (corporation tax exit charges);
(h) Clause 38 and Schedule 15 (entrepreneurs’ relief);
(i) Clauses 39 and 40 (gift aid and charities);
(j) Clauses 41 and 42 (stamp duty land tax: first-time buyers in cases of shared ownership);
(k) Clauses 46 and 47 (stamp duty and SDRT);
(l) Clauses 61 and 62 and Schedule 18 (remote gaming duty and gaming duty);
(m) Clauses 68 to 78 (carbon emissions tax);
(n) Clause 83 (international tax enforcement: disclosure arrangements);
(o) Clause 89 (minor amendments in consequence of EU withdrawal);
(p) Clause 90 (emissions reduction trading scheme: preparatory expenditure);
(q) any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to—
(i) tax thresholds or reliefs,
(ii) the subject matter of any of clauses 68 to 78, 89 and 90,
(iii) gaming duty or remote gaming duty, or
(iv) tax avoidance or evasion.
(2) The remainder of the Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Committee of the whole House

(3) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall be completed in two days.
(4) Those proceedings shall be taken on each of those days in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.
(5) Each part of the proceedings shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the times specified in the second column of the Table.
(6) Standing Order No. 83B (programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

| TABLE |
|---|---|
| Proceedings | Time for conclusion of proceedings |
| **First day** | |
| Clauses 5, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 38 and Schedule 15; Clauses 39 to 42; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to tax thresholds or reliefs Clauses 68 to 78 and 89 and 90; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to the subject matter of those clauses. | 3 hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the first day |
| 6 hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the first day |
| **Second day** | |
| Clauses 61 and 62 and Schedule 18; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to remote gaming duty or gaming duty | 3 hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the second day |
| Clause 15 and Schedule 3; Clause 16 and Schedule 4; Clauses 19 and 20; Clause 22 and Schedule 7; Clause 23 and Schedule 8; Clauses 46 and 47; Clause 83; any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to tax avoidance or evasion | 6 hours from commencement of proceedings on the Bill on the second day |

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee etc

(7) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 11 December 2018.
(8) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.
(9) When the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by the Public Bill Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill shall be proceeded with as if it had been reported as a whole to the House from the Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(10) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.
(11) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.
(12) Standing Order No. 83B (programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3, 4 and 5 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

That the draft Freedom of Information (Designation as Public Authority and Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 12 July, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Building Societies Legislation (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 19 July, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Central Counterparties (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 24 July, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.) Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ELECTRICITY)

That the draft Electricity and Gas (Powers to Make Subordinate Legislation) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.) Question put.

The Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 14 November (Standing Order No. 41A).

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, I will take motions 7 to 9 together. Once again, I assure the House that I am of course conscious of how keenly aware people are of these motions, and I merely remind them that motion 7 is about Exiting the European Union (Road Traffic) and motions 8 and 9—I can almost hear a Member mouth the words under his breath—are both entitled Road Traffic. I am sure you are all very well aware of these important matters.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ROAD TRAFFIC)

That the draft International Road Transport Permits (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 13 October, be approved.

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Trailer Registration Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 9 October, be approved.

That the draft Road Safety (Financial Penalty Deposit) (Appropriate Amount) (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 9 October, be approved.—(Andrew Stephenson.) Question agreed to.
JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE DRAFT PARLIAMENTARY BUILDINGS (RESTORATION AND RENEWAL) BILL

Motion made,

That this House concurs with the Lords Message of Tuesday 23 October, that it is expedient that a Joint Committee of Lords and Commons be appointed to consider and report on the Draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill presented to both Houses on Thursday 18 October 2018 (Cm 9710), and that the Committee should report on the draft Bill by Friday 15 February 2019.

That a Select Committee of six Members be appointed to join with a committee to be appointed by the Lords for this purpose;

That the Committee shall have power:
(i) to send for persons, papers and records;
(ii) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;
(iii) to report from time to time;
(iv) to appoint specialist advisers; and
(v) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom.

That the quorum of the Committee shall be three; and that Neil Gray, Meg Hillier, Mr David Jones, Sir Edward Leigh, Dame Caroline Spelman and Mark Tami be members of the Committee.—(Andrew Stephenson.)

Hon. Members: Object.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BILLS

Motion made,

Notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 14(8), Private Members’ bills shall have precedence over government business on 25 January 2019, 8 February 2019 and 8 March 2019. —(Andrew Stephenson.)

Hon. Members: Object.

Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations

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

Mr Speaker: In the unimaginable scenario that Members do not wish to listen to the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) proceed with his Adjournment debate, I trust that colleagues will leave the Chamber quickly and quietly, giving the hon. Gentleman the chance to be heard and to hear himself. [Interruption.] Yes, Mr Cowan, we are deeply grateful to you.

11 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank the Members staying for my Adjournment debate this evening at the early hour of 11 pm.

For those of us who like to be clear about definitions, I should start by making it clear that my Adjournment debate today is on intensive farming operations in the United Kingdom. I say this because concentrated animal feeding operations has a legal definition that is used in the United States but is also relevant to this debate. In the United States, concentrated animal feeding operations describe farms over a certain size that farm animals in extreme confinement. We do not have an equivalent definition in the United Kingdom, but we do have intensive farming of animals, which is defined by the Environment Agency as a farm housing at least 40,000 birds or 2,000 pigs. This form of intensive farming increased in the UK by a quarter in the six years running up to 2017.

As reported in The Guardian newspaper, a recent investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism found that we now have a large number of intensive farming operations in the UK, many of which would meet the definition of concentrated animal feeding operations used in the United States. These so-called megafarms have at least 125,000 birds for meat, or 82,000 birds for eggs, 2,500 pigs, 700 dairy cattle or 1,000 beef cattle. We now have 789 megafarms in the UK, according to that investigation.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We know that there are many more megafarms in the United States. Does my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour share my concern that if we open our markets to lower-standard imports from the US post Brexit, our farmers will feel that they have no choice but to move to megafarming in order to compete on price?

Darren Jones: I agree entirely. I do not think British consumers will accept that position, not least because they enjoy the high-quality standards that we expect of many of our food producers in the UK. If that is exerting a pressure on home-grown produce, they will not accept it either.

Seven of the 10 largest poultry farms in this country already have a capacity to house more than 1 million birds, with the biggest farm holding up to 23,000 pigs and the largest cattle farm 3,000 cattle. These are all numbers, but to give an example to the House, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism study showed that a megafarm in Herefordshire had four 110-metre by 20-metre industrial warehouses, each with 42,000 chickens in them. There were so many chickens in these warehouses...
that the journalists could not see the floor. These chickens live for only a short period, and the process is repeated up to eight times each year, so that is a turnover of over 1 million birds every year in these confined settings.

These conditions are bad for animals and bad for our food. Confinement can lead to the stress-related death of animals; self-mutilation of animals due to mental health conditions; ulcerated feet, bacterial infection, mastitis, anaemia, stomach ulcers and chronic diarrhoea. These are not things consumers wish to have associated with the food they eat. As a consequence, I will be writing to Tesco, Sainsbury, the Co-operative, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Asda, McDonald’s and Nando’s, all of which, I am told, buy the products I am talking about for their customers.

These stressful, illness-inducing environments also lead to the excessive use of antibiotics in animal feed and water to try to limit the risk of disease from intensive farming settings. According to Compassion in World Farming, there is strong evidence that the overuse of antibiotics in animals is contributing to the antibiotic resistance we are now seeing in human medicine—something this country is, thankfully, working hard to try to prevent.

To make matters worse, these extreme farming conditions can lead animals to become stressed. Again, that is bad for food, but it is also bad for animals. I am told that stress-induced aggressive animal behaviours have led to chickens being de-beaked, which involves a hot blade cutting through a bird’s beak, bone and soft tissue. Chicken toes are also removed to discourage fighting, and the tails of pigs and cows are removed to prevent tail biting. Again, these are conditions I am sure many British consumers would not want associated with the food on their plates.

However, this is not just about the quality of food or the quality of animal welfare; it is also about the environment and our efforts at tackling climate change. The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report said we have 12 years to limit post-industrial levels of world temperature growth to 1.5°C—the subject of a separate debate I will be leading at 9.30 tomorrow morning in Westminster Hall.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman and I might have a slightly different opinion on this matter. I declare an interest as a landowner, and I live on a farm on the Ards peninsula in my constituency. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—the Department responsible in Northern Ireland—has stated that there is no problem with the scale of concentrated animal feeding operations in Northern Ireland. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that farmers—my neighbours—with all their focus on welfare and quality of life? A healthy animal and bird is what the market demands and what the market receives.

Darren Jones: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that farmers, I am sure, do the best they can for their businesses, their livestock and their customers, but we need to create an environment in which we support sustainable farming, not over-farming, as we have seen in these concentrated environments. I understand that the highest increase in concentrated farming in the country has been in Northern Ireland.

The IPCC is about climate change and carbon emissions. Mega farms might in theory, but not always in practice, reduce the amount of space needed for animals, but these animals still need to be fed, which means an ever-increasing amount of food for an ever-increasing number of animals farmed. That has resulted in huge amounts of land being used to grow animal food, often with the use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers. Reducing or eliminating industrial farming has been shown to be a significant way to reduce our overall carbon emissions.

I should declare, of course, that I am a vegan. I became a vegan primarily because of those environmental concerns. I was persuaded, in fact, by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). I was also persuaded because of the animal welfare and health concerns associated with this environment. Veganism is something that more and more people are taking up, which is why you, Mr Speaker, will see vegan options becoming more popular in service stations, supermarkets and restaurants across the country—and, indeed, in the parliamentary restaurants this week.

However, this Adjournment debate is not happening just because I am interested. I am grateful to the House of Commons digital outreach team, who trailed this debate on our House Facebook page. Over 5,000 members of the public have been engaged, with many kindly giving me their feedback. Kara and Lisa made the point that information should be required on food labelling and that they would like to know if the animal products they are buying come from intensive farming settings, so that they can decide whether to buy them.

Clare and Karen were two of many voices that said that animal welfare was a key concern that directs their shopping decisions. Some say they cannot always afford to buy higher quality meat, so they eat less meat or eat alternatives as a consequence. Caroline, Kelly and Leanne say they buy only organic or free-range meat for their families as a consequence.

I fully appreciate that it is not the role of Government to tell people what to eat, but if we can agree to public health campaigns for eating five fruit and veg a day, or agree to a sugar tax because of the public health consequences, then it is right that we should be having this debate and deciding what kind of action we can take for public health, animal welfare, and the pressing and urgent requirement to reduce our carbon emissions more dramatically in the years ahead.

I hope the Minister in his summing up today will touch on the following points. What policy are the Government pursuing to reduce or prevent intensive farming in the United Kingdom, including working with agri-tech companies that can stimulate innovation for new methods of farming, whether high-rise farming or the production of meat products in the kitchen laboratory as opposed to the farm? What work is the Minister’s Department undertaking with colleagues across Government to change food and farming policy to help to meet our climate change objectives? Following a recent consultation on antibiotic use in farming, what
measures will the Government take to prevent antibiotic resistance in animals and the indirect consequences for human health?

Will the Government consider new regulations on food labelling to make it easier for consumers to understand the quality and source of their food products? How will the Government commit to maintaining and hopefully enhancing EU-derived legislation through the Brexit process? Finally, what assurances can the Government give the House tonight that under no circumstances, further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East, will they agree to international trade deals, such as with the United States, that permit the import of food products from intensive farming settings from across the world?

I apologise to the Minister. I had hoped to print off that realm of questions to give to him in advance of the debate, but sadly I was unable to do so. I am sure that if he is unable to answer them all this evening we can correspond with reference to Hansard in the coming days.

11.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing this debate on the scale of concentrated animal feeding operations. He made a number of very important points, which I know he makes from a heartfelt perspective and as a matter of principle.

This is an important debate and I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about moving towards more industrial-scale farming. I would like to focus on some concerns that have been raised with regard to beef farming in the context of what he said. It is important to recognise that while we need to manage animal welfare to high standards, we need to recognise the contribution that these various sectors, whether beef, poultry or pork, make not just to food production but to rural economies. I think there is a balance to be struck.

It is worth highlighting from the start that we have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. Our consumers are right to expect that their food is produced to those high quality standards. All operational livestock farms, for example, comply with comprehensive UK welfare legislation. That legislation—I am talking specifically about beef here—applies equally to all livestock farms, regardless of scale or system of production. There is also a specific statutory cattle welfare code, which provides guidance to cattle producers on how to comply with legislation. That is true for other types of farming which the hon. Gentleman touched on in his remarks.

As long as the relevant welfare standards are met, we recognise that the UK market has a place for different production methods. These will collectively enable the industry to be competitive and thrive in the UK, EU and global markets. I can understand the concern about the reports of very large stock units. However, big does not necessarily always mean bad with regard to animal welfare. Indeed, an article in The Guardian on this subject stated that most “intensive beef farms appear to operate to high welfare standards”.

I can confirm that the Animal and Plant Health Agency and the Government’s expert committee, the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, visited this system type and no welfare concerns were raised, including in relation to shelter, stock densities and the legal requirement to have access to a well-drained lying area. These approaches apply to other areas of farming, too.

The key point to highlight is that poor welfare may occur in both intensive and extensive systems. Stockmanship and the correct application of husbandry standards, whatever the system of production, is the key to ensuring good welfare for all farmed animals. We have a strong track record of raising the bar for welfare standards, such as banning battery cages for laying hens, sow stalls and veal crates.

While the UK already has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, we are considering what more can be done in the context of our future agricultural policy. The response to the “Health and Harmony” consultation reinforced the view that high standards of animal welfare are a priority for the public. We will maintain our high regulatory baseline and look to raise standards sustainably over time as new research and evidence emerges.

In addition, as set out in the Agriculture Bill, we will develop publicly funded schemes for farmers to deliver animal welfare enhancements beyond the high regulatory baseline already in place that are not sufficiently provided by the market. We are working with sector groups, retailers, welfare organisations and the Farm Animal Welfare Committee to define a range of enhanced standards.

We are examining the role that farm assurance schemes can play in delivering these payments. There are important vehicles ahead that will enable us to address some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman discussed. We are already acting to improve the welfare of livestock through, for example, making CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses, increasing the maximum sentences for animal cruelty to five years, and working to restrict exports of live animals for slaughter once we leave the EU.

I understand that there are concerns that US-style livestock farming will come to the UK, but I reassure Members that EU exit will not result in a move towards US-style agribusiness in the UK, with animal welfare and environmental standards being eroded. The Government are committed to maintaining and, where possible, improving current standards. US-style livestock farming is not what we want and will not happen here.

Darren Jones: Will the Minister confirm that the enhanced regulations that he has referred to for UK farming will have extraterritorial effect, meaning that we will not import food products into the UK that do not meet the standards that we expect of British farmers?

David Rutley: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman on the detail of that, but I assure him that we have no desire at all to water down our standards. Talk of importing hormone-treated beef or chlorinated chicken is not where we want to go and it will not be contemplated in any of the trade deals that we have going forward. If he wants to explore that in more detail, I will gladly get into that level of detail.

Kerry McCarthy: I appreciate that the Minister is not the farming Minister, but when we tried to introduce a non-regression clause in the Trade Bill, we were told that it was not the place for it. We are now trying to
introduce it in the Agriculture Bill, and we are being told that the place for it is the Trade Bill. We need something enshrined in legislation, rather than just the warm words of Ministers, to say that we will not accept imports with lower standards than those required from our farmers in the UK. Does the Minister agree?

David Rutley: As I said, I will come back on those technical points, but there is no attempt or desire across whichever piece of legislation to water down standards. I have been very clear on that in other debates and I am very clear on it here as well. I will come back to the hon. Members on the points that they have raised.

Other points were raised about labelling and marketing terms. We will look at ways in which we can ensure that consumers have a clearer understanding of the animal welfare standards applying to products. Terms such as “free range” for poultry and eggs are already enshrined in law, but other such as “pasture-fed” or “outdoor-reared” rely on voluntary agreements for their use. It is important that consumers have complete confidence in the way that these terms are used and that their use is clear and consistent. We will therefore review, after we leave the EU, the use of these terms to build consumer knowledge and confidence in these terms and concepts. Leaving the EU gives us an opportunity to shape the future of our farming industry and to help our farmers to grow and sell more world-class food, but as I have said, we will not compromise on the high animal welfare or environmental standards, and we will always protect our proud and varied farming traditions.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West made an important point about antimicrobial resistance. Another example of the UK agriculture sector’s responsible approach to food production is its recent concerted efforts and action against the globally recognised threat of antimicrobial resistance. Last month, the Government published a report showing a reduction for the fourth year in a row in the sales of veterinary antibiotics. This has brought us to a 40% reduction in veterinary antibiotic sales over the course of the UK five-year antimicrobial resistance strategy, with levels now the lowest that we have seen since we started recording them in the early 1990s, so real progress is being made there.

Behind this success lies close, collaborative working between the Government and the livestock sector, including the beef sector, which has developed and published targets for the reduction, refinement and replacement of antibiotics. These targets apply across the whole sector in farms of all sizes. With all that we have achieved, we want to make sure we continue to have a world-leading beef sector going forward with the right welfare standards in place, and that applies to other sectors as well.

We heard talk also of the agri-tech strategy in the years ahead. Research, development and technological innovation are key if we are to compete globally. By pioneering the use of more innovative and efficient farming techniques, we can also use our resources more sustainably and reduce the environmental impact. For example, the Centre of Innovation Excellence in Livestock, established under the 2013 agri-tech strategy, aims to support, promote and deliver industry-led innovative livestock research, a key asset being its beef grazing systems unit, which assesses feed efficiency and productivity at pasture. Our future research and development proposals will build on existing investments to enable greater take-up of innovation on farms.

We are a proud trading nation. We have talked about trade, but I want to reiterate for the record where we stand. The UK enjoys food from diverse sources of supply as well as our strong domestic production industry. There is no reason to believe that other third countries cannot meet our high standards, and this will be a condition for any market access granted as part of future trade agreements. The Government have been clear that any future trade agreements must work for consumers, farmers and businesses in the UK. I want to be clear that we will not water down our standards on food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection as part of any future trade deals.

Future reform is critical. We need to take the opportunity that being outside the common agricultural policy will give us to use public money to reward environmentally responsible land use. We know that good environmental practice, high standards of animal welfare and profitable business strategies are not mutually exclusive. We believe they run hand in hand. We will work to ensure that UK agriculture prospers for future generations by designing an approach that works for our farmers and that high environmental and animal welfare standards are a badge of quality.

The UK produces some of the best quality food in the world, and that is the basis on which we intend to sell our produce at home and abroad, promoting and enhancing the reputation of British food and drink through the Food is GREAT campaign. We now have an unprecedented opportunity to redesign our policies to ensure our agricultural industry is competitive, productive and profitable and that our environment is improved for future generations, while at the same time working to improve animal welfare, as the hon. Gentleman highlighted in his remarks.

We are working closely with the industry and the public to drive agricultural and environment policies. We are rightly proud of the high animal welfare standards that underpin our high-quality British produce, and we will not only maintain but work to enhance these standards through our future policy framework. Once again, I would like to thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate on such a vital subject and for conducting it in such a considered way. I look forward to working with him through correspondence and future debates—no doubt—on this vital subject.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 13 November 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Probation: Community Rehabilitation Companies

1. Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the proportion of offenders on probation being supported by community rehabilitation companies. [907501]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): The CRCs currently supervise just over 59% of all offenders and the National Probation Service supervises 41%.

Meg Hillier: The CRC contract has been a dog’s breakfast, so what is the Minister going to do to make sure that CRCs do work better to support people, particularly those on shorter sentences?

Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to the Public Accounts Committee for its work in looking at exactly this subject. In order to work better, we are consulting on having a closer relationship between the National Probation Service and the CRCs. Secondly, we are making sure we put much more focus on the basics, by which we mean the risk assessment, the plan for probation and regular contact.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I recently visited the Kent, Surrey and Sussex CRC to see the great work it is doing to support 9,000 low-risk and medium-risk offenders across three counties, including through an excellent partnership with Buckmore Park scouts for community payback. Will the Minister join me in congratulating it on its creative partnership and holistic approach to the offender, which is bringing about positive results in rehabilitation?

Rory Stewart: Yes, I would like to pay tribute to that CRC, which is performing well, and to other CRCs such as Cumbria’s. I also pay tribute to the London CRC for the innovative work it is doing on knife crime rehabilitation.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): There is a lack of information about, and confidence in, how CRCs are using rehabilitation activity requirements. Will the Minister look at how, in the negotiation of new contracts, there can be more precision about the expectations on CRCs as to how they administer RARs and, in particular, how they provide evidence that structured activity is taking place?

Rory Stewart: Very much so; a key part of the new consultation is taking some of the previous flexibility away and defining much more closely the requirements on regularity of contact, type of contact and the expectation on the offender.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the keys to rehabilitation is to ensure manageable case loads for probation officers, so that more time and energy can be spent on each individual?

Rory Stewart: That is correct, which is why we are currently recruiting more than 1,000 new probation officers and probation support officers. But this is about not only the case load per prisoner but making sure we can focus most on the most risky prisoners and getting the right relationship between staff and risk.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Does the Minister believe that charities such as YMCA and the Prince’s Trust have a vital role to play in community rehabilitation?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. YMCA and the Prince’s Trust have a role to play, and indeed more than 15,000 charities in Britain have working with offenders as one of their objectives. The third sector has so much to offer, and, in renegotiating and redesigning probation contracts, we must make it much easier for charities and the third sector to engage in them and bring their skills and knowledge.

Family Court Reform

2. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What progress he is making on family court reform. [907502]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): People often come to the courts system when they are at their most vulnerable, and we want to ensure not only that they have a fair system to determine their disputes, but that it is as simple and straightforward as possible. In the family courts, we are making the process not only more simple but less antagonistic. For example, we are making our application processes more straightforward in divorce and child arrangement applications; we are committed to giving the family court the power to prohibit abusers from cross-examining their victims; and we are consulting on taking the requirement of fault out of divorce.

Sir Desmond Swayne: If the courts were to publish clear advice as to what access parents might reasonably expect, fewer of them would perhaps be tempted to litigate, would they not?

Lucy Frazer: As my right hon. Friend implies, every parent who separates wants to continue to have contact with their child. I was pleased to talk about this issue with him and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), I have taken up their proposal and spoken about it with the president of the family division, as well as with a number of organisations that deal with children and legal representatives in the
family courts. I should say that they all have differing perspectives, but we are looking at this matter very closely.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is now two years since the Government made a commitment to ban perpetrators from cross-examining victims of domestic abuse in family courts, which the Minister has just mentioned, but when will she actually follow through on that and finally act on this issue?

**Lucy Frazer**: We will follow through on this issue, which is a Government priority—

**Stephanie Peacock**: But when?

**Lucy Frazer**: It will be in a Bill as soon as legislation and the parliamentary timetable allow.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the consultation on divorce law reform is an opportunity to look into ways to cause less harm to children of all parents who separate, as well as to strengthen families along the lines of the marriage and relationship support initiative brought in by Lord Mackay?

**Lucy Frazer**: We in the Ministry of Justice are committed to the institution of marriage and recognise the value that it brings to the children of a marriage, as well as to society as a whole. Our proposals and consultation on divorce are about looking at how to make the process easier when the very difficult decision to divorce has been made. Of course, any measures to strengthen families would be welcome.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline the steps that have been taken specifically to address the reform of fathers’ rights during divorce proceedings on access to children?

**Lucy Frazer**: All parents’ rights are incredibly important, but in the family court the heart of every case is the child’s best interests. That is the basis on which judges make their determination. There is a presumption that contact with both mother and father is in the child’s interests, but each case depends on its own facts.

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): Women’s Aid has long been concerned that although the experiences of victims of domestic abuse are taken seriously in the criminal courts, they are diminished or even ignored in the family courts. That is exactly what is happening to a woman with whom I am in touch, whose spouse is serving time for attempting to murder her. She has been asked to provide pension and bank statements, payslips, proof of the valuation of her home, and even evidence of the medical toll on her health. It is wrong. Will the Minister work with me to change the law to stop those who attempt to murder their spouse reaping any financial benefit?

**Lucy Frazer**: Domestic violence is a huge issue on which the Government have taken several steps, including by widening the scope of abuse that is caught by the law on coercive control and by the requirements for legal aid. I am pleased to have met the hon. Lady already to discuss the issue that she mentions, and we are looking into it.

**Prison Officer Recruitment**

3. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What progress his Department has made on recruiting 2,500 prison officers.  

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart)**: I am delighted to say that we have been very successful and are well ahead of schedule. Instead of simply 2,500 extra prison officers, we have 3,653 more than we had in 2016, and job offers have gone out to a further 2,000 potential prison officers.

**Henry Smith**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer and welcome those additional prison officers. What protective equipment is being provided to prison officers to keep them and the prison population safer?

**Rory Stewart**: The use of body-worn cameras and CCTV cameras, which we have rolled out, makes it much easier to monitor what is happening in prisons. For extreme situations, we are rolling out the ability to use pepper spray. The key will be not the protective equipment but having in place the right support and training for prison officers, to make sure that their behaviour to a prisoner is appropriate, both to challenge and to reform. That involves investing in our senior staff to provide that model.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Data shows that a third of new prison officers leave the service within the first two years, so even if the Government meet their 2,500 recruitment target, nearly 800 officers will leave within the first 24 months. What steps will the Minister take to address the shockingly low level of staff retention in the Prison Service?

**Rory Stewart**: I am glad to say that attrition rates are beginning to stabilise, but they are of course a massive concern. More decent, cleaner, less drug-filled and violent prisons will be important for staff morale, and the right training—we are transforming training courses—will be central for prison officers. We have a huge opportunity. These are young, idealistic people, often with fantastic communication skills. We need to invest in them, because they are the foundation for the future of the Prison Service.

**Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): Central to the welcome drive to recruit more prison officers is the need to ensure that they can work safely. Prison officers at HMP Gartree in my constituency are concerned that sometimes, as a result of local police and Crown Prosecution Service decisions, assaults on staff are not prosecuted. Will the Minister assure me that he will look into the matter if I write to him, and that any act of violence against our brave prison officers is unacceptable?

**Rory Stewart**: This point is central. We need to make sure that prisoners are appropriately challenged and punished, particularly if they assault prison officers. Far too many prison officers who are protecting us—protecting the public—are being assaulted. We are therefore piloting in HMP Isis in London a system
whereby the Metropolitan police is putting officers into prisons to follow up and increase the chance of prosecution. That is also why we pay tribute to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has worked with us to double the maximum sentence for assaults on prison officers, and that comes into effect today.

**Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): The Minister would now not need to be talking about training for new officers had the Government not got rid of 7,000 experienced prison officers to start with. Does he now accept that that was a massive mistake and has contributed to disorder, the rising drug use and assaults on prison staff within our prisons?

**Rory Stewart**: To agree with the hon. Lady to some extent, clearly the fact that we are recruiting 2,500 more officers reflects the fact that we think we need 2,500 more officers. Looking forward, the key is to make sure that people are supported both in college and on the landings to have the skill and experience they need. The challenge now is not numbers, but training and the estate.

**Legal Aid**

4. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of people that are able to access legal aid for (a) immigration, (b) welfare benefit and (c) housing cases.

**Lucy Frazer**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that citizens advice bureaux across the country, including in Cheltenham, as well as many other legal help organisations, help to ensure that the most vulnerable people are getting the support that they need. This week, the Ministry of Justice brought together 200 organisations that help and support people in need to talk to them about what more we and they can do.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Investing in high-quality legal advice for asylum seekers at an early stage is critical if we are not subsequently to waste large amounts of public money supporting failed asylum seekers who perhaps do not have a case, but who have been misadvised. What can the Minister do to assure me that all asylum seekers will get the highest-quality legal advice through legal aid at the earliest stage?

**Lucy Frazer**: It is important to highlight two things. One is that the Government spend about £100 million on early advice every year. The second is that there is a misconception about what legal aid is and is not available. In fact, legal aid is available for asylum work as well as for non-asylum work, including detention. Special Immigration Appeals Commission, domestic violence and trafficking cases.

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Will my hon. and learned Friend expand on the Department’s current review of legal aid reforms and say what representations have been received from the Labour party?

**Lucy Frazer**: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. We have received a large number of representations from across the country about what we should be doing in relation to legal aid, and we are looking at them carefully. The Labour party has not put in any representations.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): At yesterday’s Sanctuary in Parliament event, we heard about the huge importance of family reunion for refugees, but also about the complexity of the application process. Will the Government support the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), and restore legal aid in England and Wales for such applications?

**Lucy Frazer**: Family reunion is an important issue, and I have met a number of Members to discuss that Bill. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are looking at legal aid broadly and will set out the consequences of our review by the end of the year.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): Of all the cuts to justice, the slashing of legal advice for sick and disabled people who are unfairly denied their benefits is one of the cruelest. We now have a shameful situation whereby people are first denied the financial support to which they are entitled and then must struggle through a difficult appeal without legal advice. This situation is bad enough already, but it will be even tougher under universal credit. Under the Conservatives, legal advice for welfare benefits cases has been cut by 99%. Is the Minister ashamed that sick and disabled people are paying the price for this Government’s ideological cuts agenda, or was that the deliberate intention?
Lucy Frazer: I am not aware of any representations from the Labour party in relation to any provisions that it would make on legal aid funding. This is an important area involving people who are vulnerable and need help. Prior to LASPO, people did not get help at the representation stage of welfare cases—only at the advice stage. We are making a number of changes to make the tribunal process that people go through much simpler and more straightforward.

Richard Burgon: Let us be clear: legal advice was given to 91,000 people in the year before this Government’s reforms to legal aid. How many was it last year? It was 478 people, not 91,000. Can the Minister honestly tell the House that the need for legal advice has reduced by such a degree, or should we instead conclude that—just as with employment tribunal fees, housing advice, employment advice and immigration advice—the cuts to legal advice for the sick and disabled are really about targeting the weak so that they can enrich the powerful?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned earlier, we spend £100 million on legal help and we are improving the tribunals service to enable people to access and liaise with judges to improve their process through the court system.

Leaving the EU: Justice System

5. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the justice system of the UK leaving the EU. [907505]

12. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the justice system of the UK leaving the EU. [907513]

18. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the justice system of the UK leaving the EU. [907519]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): We laid out our ambition in the policy paper that we produced in August 2017 and again in the most recent White Paper, setting out that we want the closest possible co-operation in civil and family justice matters that is as good as possible. I look forward to ensuring that we negotiate the best possible deal on this matter going forward.

Hannah Bardell: The recent Scottish Government publication on security and judicial co-operation emphasises the need for Scotland’s separate legal and judicial system to be taken into account during the Brexit negotiation process. Can the Minister give a cast-iron guarantee that any new arrangements between the UK and the EU will respect Scotland’s separate and independent judicial system?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady is right to identify the separate and distinct legal arrangements that we have in Scotland. We negotiate and work very closely with Scotland and the Scottish Government on all these matters. In relation to no deal planning, there is almost weekly contact between my officials and those in the Scottish Government.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Our legal system is respected throughout the world. What steps are being taken to ensure that that continues through Brexit and beyond?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Although Europe is a key partner for us throughout our services and legal services industries, there is a world beyond Europe. We in the Ministry of Justice are supporting, through our Legal Services are GREAT campaign, the continued work and co-operation of legal services abroad. We have been to Kazakhstan and to Nigeria.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The effect of a no-deal Brexit will obviously range widely, but how it will affect our justice system has not been much reported. Will the Minister assure the House that we are putting in place all the necessary planning for a no-deal Brexit even though we hope that it will not arise?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is right. As a responsible Government, we are ensuring that we have our preparations in place. We have published two technical notices, one on civil judicial co-operation and one on legal services abroad. We are putting together our statutory instruments to pass to ensure that our legal system continues to work, and we have £17.3 million from the Treasury for no deal preparations.

Mr Speaker: I can hardly overstate the importance of persistence in bobbing. I say to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) that to bob once is inadequate. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to participate, he should now bob again.
Mr Speaker: He is bobbing. Persistent bobbing is a very important principle in the House.

20. [907522] Gavin Newlands: I appreciate your advice, Mr Speaker.

Despite the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), the Institute for Government states that if the UK leaves the EU without a deal, extradition arrangements will revert back to the European convention on extradition. That process takes, on average, a year, while the current arrangements under the European arrest warrant take 48 days. Does the Minister not accept that a no-deal Brexit would cause significant challenges in tackling cross-border crime?

Lucy Frazer: There are many areas of security and justice where it is important and beneficial to get the best possible arrangement. The European arrest warrant is an important one, and we are negotiating hard to ensure that we get the best possible arrangement going forward.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The former director of Europol, a Brit, has warned that deal or no deal, leaving the EU means that the UK will lose our leadership role in Europol and Eurojust, often both critical for fighting the most serious criminals. How does the Minister believe that leaving the EU will help Britain to bring serious organised criminal gangs to justice?

Lucy Frazer: As I have mentioned, Europol and the European arrest warrant—all these areas where we share data—are incredibly important to us, as they are to the EU. We are one of the largest contributors to security information within the EU. The Home Office leads on these matters, and it is trying to ensure that we get the best possible co-operation going forward.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Contrary to the assurances that the Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), the process of leaving the European Union has been marred by the UK Government’s consistent failure to consult the Scottish Government or Scotland’s Law Officers about the impact on Scotland’s separate and independent legal system. Can she now give me an assurance that this is not indicative of a plan to use Brexit to undermine Scotland’s independent legal system, which is of course protected by the Act of Union?

Lucy Frazer: We have a devolution Act that sets out very clearly the separate and distinct nature of Scotland. We have almost weekly contact with officials on no deal planning. Paul Candler, who is a director in the MOJ, had a director-level meeting with his colleagues from Scotland and Northern Ireland on 9 November. We are legislating on behalf of Scotland at the Scottish Government’s request and with their permission. We are working very closely with Scotland on a number of SIs. I met the Scottish Law Society chair, Michael Clancy, earlier this year.

Joanna Cherry: It is Government contact I am talking about, not contact with the Law Society, important as that is. The Minister should realise that Scotland’s independent legal system is protected not by devolution, but by the 1707 Act of Union. Scotland’s highest court has made a reference to the Court of Justice of the European Union on the question of whether article 50 is unilaterally revocable, not by the Government, but by this Parliament. The case will be heard on 27 November, but the UK Government are fighting it tooth and nail, even to the extent of attempting an appeal to the Supreme Court, despite the fact that an appeal to the Supreme Court is expressly prohibited in Scots law where there has been a unanimous interlocutory decision of Scotland’s highest court. Can the Minister tell me whether that is part of the plan to undermine Scotland’s separate legal system? How much money are the Government prepared to spend on keeping MPs in the dark about the revocability of article 50?

Lucy Frazer: This Government are committed to the Union and to respecting the distinct Scottish legal system. I am fully aware of the matter before the Supreme Court, and we look forward to its judgment.

Access to Justice: Persons with Disabilities

6. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of his Department’s compliance with article 13 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities on access to justice.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government remain fully committed to the convention, and we assess the UK’s implementation of article 13 of the convention as part of the reporting process to the UN. The latest report to the UN was this year. To improve access to justice for people with disabilities, we are investing £1 billion in reforming the Courts and Tribunals Service, to continue to ensure that we have a modern justice system that is accessible to all. We are also increasing the use of technology to benefit the mobility impaired, who may have greater opportunity to participate in court and tribunal services without needing to travel to a hearing centre.

Debbie Abrahams: Article 13 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, to which we are a signatory, goes well beyond access to and the right to a fair trial and includes all aspects of democracy, rule of law and the effective administration of justice for all people. Given that disabled people have been disproportionately affected by cuts to legal aid for social security cases, and that hate crimes against disabled people are on the rise and employment discrimination is increasing, when will the Justice Secretary ensure that we fulfil our commitments under article 13?

Mr Gauke: We do fulfil our commitments, and I have to point out what we do as a country. We are proud of our record in supporting disabled people, including through the landmark Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and we have some of the strongest equalities legislation in the world, including the Equality Act 2010.
7. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle the use of drones over prisons.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): In order to deal with drones, we need to focus on electronic interference with and electronic interrogation of drones. We also need better intelligence systems, but in the end, a drone is just a delivery system; it is a way of getting things into a prison. Better grilles, better netting and better processes with prison officers to ensure that we inspect the yards will be central, whether we are talking about drones or throw-overs.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Minister for that advice. Drones are undermining the effectiveness of a number of our prisons. Does he agree that on top of what he suggests, we should be working with the manufacturers of drones, to ensure that they are helping to keep criminals under control?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. There is much more that we could do with the manufacturers of drones. Drones contain geo-fencing equipment, which prohibits them going over civil aviation space, for example. We can do more there, but we cannot just rely on software. In the end, good intelligence and good processes and procedures in prisons are the real guarantee against drones bringing in drugs.

8. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of the effect on the earnings of barristers of recent changes to criminal legal aid fees.

Lucy Frazer: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Criminal barristers play a fundamental role in ensuring access to justice, often for the most vulnerable in our society. Having already increased their fees by £9 million in April this year, we launched a consultation on a proposal to increase fees by a further £15 million. That consultation has recently closed, and we are carefully considering the responses.

Rachael Maskell: Our justice system depends on proper legal representation. A constituent of mine, a dedicated and experienced barrister, works 15 hours a day, six to seven days a week. Two years ago, he earned £8,000; last year, he struck lucky and earned £26,000. Will the Minister commit to honouring the letter and spirit of the advocates’ graduated fees scheme, and make sure it has an early review?

Lucy Frazer: The Lord Chancellor and I take very seriously the importance of having a system of advocates that represents people, and we value the independent Bar as well as the employed Bar. I met the leaders of the Bar Council last week, as well as the leaders—the chair and the vice-chair—of the Criminal Bar Association to hear their concerns, and we are listening very closely to what they have to say.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Evans, for Question 9—not here. Where is the fellah? I hope he is not indisposed.

10. Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What progress the Government are making on their proposals to crack down on rogue bailiffs.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Rogue bailiffs are undermining the effectiveness of our justice system in protecting victims, and often vulnerable people. Through the Communities and Local Government Committee, we are carefully considering the responses.

Emma Reynolds: A constituent of mine, who is disabled and vulnerable, was petrified when she thought she was being burgled: two bailiffs aggressively entered her house without showing any ID, rummaged in her bag and took £240 out of her purse. She was made to pay another £180 on top of that. She only learned afterwards that this was due to a parking fine because her disabled badge was out of date. Given the shocking figures from Citizens Advice, which the Minister referred to, showing that a bailiff breaks the rules every minute, when will the Government urgently review the rules and introduce an independent body to police the rules?

Lucy Frazer: I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Lady’s constituent’s situation. I would be very happy to discuss the individual case, as we look at evidence, following the call for evidence. As I have mentioned, we intend to launch the call for evidence before the end of the year, when we will look at these matters very carefully.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): In relation to Question 9, Bishop Rachel of Gloucester has called for short-term prison sentences for women to be replaced with community-based rehab—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is ahead of himself. Let me explain to him that Question 9 was not asked, and he cannot shoehorn his inquiry into a question that has been asked, if it is germane and within scope. I was trying to be helpful to the hon. Gentleman, whose Question 22 is highly unlikely to be reached. I was very happy to accommodate him on an earlier question, on the premise that his supplementary to it is within its scope. Knowing the intellectual ferocity of the hon. Gentleman and the helpful delaying tactic I have just deployed to give him a little time to reflect, I feel sure that he can now produce a wonderful, perfectly formed and very brief inquiry.

Richard Graham: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In terms of rogue activities, Bishop Rachel has called for community-based rehab for women prisoners; the high cost and the low outcomes for them are not very satisfactory. Does the Minister share my strong support for this proposal, which would reduce the number of rogues in prison and offer an important role for the high-quality rehab work of the Nelson Trust in Gloucester and Stroud?

Mr Speaker: Very well done, indeed. The question was nothing if not rougish.
Lucy Frazer: That was a very intriguing question on one about bailiffs. This matter is reflected in our female offenders strategy, and I am sure that the Minister responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), will be very happy to discuss it further with my hon. Friend.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) about the experience of her constituent, 2.2 million people contacted by a bailiff in the past two years have experienced the bailiff pushing the legal limits—my hon. Friend’s constituent experienced that—including forced entry into a home, removing goods needed for work and refusing a reasonable payment plan. The 2014 reforms clearly are not working. Does the Minister not agree that it is time to have an independent bailiff regulator to get a grip on these abuses of justice?

Lucy Frazer: I know that the hon. Lady cares deeply about the matters under discussion and was quoted this morning in relation to them. I recently met Peter Tutton, who is head of policy at StepChange. He made the point about independent regulation and we will consider it in due course.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What was the outcome of the review of the implementation of the bailiff reforms?

Lucy Frazer: We reviewed them recently and made a number of proposals to protect vulnerable people. Interestingly, although it criticises enforcement, the Citizens Advice report, which came out this morning, says that the changes we made in 2014 were largely positive.

Access to Justice: Court Staffing


Lucy Frazer: I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I am very pleased that he took part in the scheme and that it is excellent. I encourage all other Members to take part in it, too.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will the Minister provide further detail on how the planned reforms will enable judges to be deployed more effectively?

Lucy Frazer: As my hon. Friend has highlighted, a very effective and efficient measure is in the process of going through Parliament and it will enable judges to be deployed very effectively, to sit in other jurisdictions and to be used in the best possible way.

Reducing Reoffending Rates

13. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What steps he is taking to reduce reoffending rates.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Reducing reoffending is essentially about many things, but the three most important are making sure that someone has a job, that their addiction problems are addressed and that they have accommodation. We are addressing accommodation in Bristol, Pentonville and Leeds, through new wraparound support to help people into accommodation. We have a new education and employment strategy, and we are working with the NHS on addiction. It is possible to reduce reoffending but, as we learn internationally, it is never easy.

Tom Brake: May I commend to the Minister the report of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health, ably led by its chair, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)? It focuses on the issue of mental health and the support required for people who have left prison. Will the Minister say more about the work he does with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that that support is available?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely essential. More than half of our prisoners are currently presenting with mental health issues. When I shadowed a prison officer in Wormwood Scrubs last week, I had a long conversation with somebody who had attempted to kill themselves and had been hearing voices. That is not unusual. We have to work much more closely with the NHS. I am very pleased at the progress that the NHS is making, and I hope that future investment in the NHS and mental health will go directly into prisons.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The work being done by the Minister is very welcome, but will he also recollect that we need to start on preparation for release much earlier than the 12 or so weeks currently built into the contractual arrangements?

Rory Stewart: That is absolutely right. The key worker scheme that we are rolling out allows the prison officer to develop a relationship with an individual prisoner, to work with them on their sentence plan and education
plan. One reason why it is so important is that it will help us to settle people into the community much earlier in their sentence.

Mike Amesbury: Between April and December 2017, National Careers Service advisers aided almost 4,000 prisoners into employment or non-OLASS—offender learning and skills service—learning. How many prisoners have been referred to employment or education since the Government scrapped those advisers in March? The Minister has rightly said that this is important for rehabilitation.

Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to the work of the National Careers Service, but there are many other providers working within the prison estate. The New Futures Network, which we are now rolling out, is doing things that were not done by the National Careers Service, in particular bringing more employers into prison to develop those relationships. There is a great deal we could learn, but we believe the current system will deliver better results and our employment figures for prisoners are looking very promising.

Tom Pursglove: The work of Care after Combat with veterans on rehabilitation is making a real difference and meets the needs of the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence. Will the Minister congratulate Jim Davidson and his team on the remarkable work they are doing on this agenda, and help to take a lead across government to ensure that that wonderful charity can access the funding it needs to continue and expand this important work?

Rory Stewart: Care after Combat does terrific work. I was lucky enough to meet Jim Davidson and his team—indeed, I did so with a Defence Minister. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), will meet Mr Davidson again shortly. It is a great example of the way a proper wraparound service that addresses mental health, accommodation and employment can really help to prevent reoffending.

HMP Liverpool

14. Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on the implementation of its action plan for HMP Liverpool.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): The issues in HMP Liverpool were of course shocking. It was a very challenged prison and some challenges still remain, in particular around the issue of self-harm. Nevertheless, Governor Pia Sinha and her team have effected a real transformation. I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise, from visiting Liverpool prison, that over 100 cells have now been fully refurbished. We have reduced the population and, above all, there is a sense of a much safer, more orderly prison. This is real progress in 11 months. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Pia Sinha and her team.

Dan Carden: I join the Minister in those comments. In August, he announced the 10 prisons strategy to tackle violence and drugs in 10 of the worst prisons in the country. I am wondering why HMP Liverpool was not included in that project. As the Minister offered to resign should he not be able to reduce the levels of drugs and violence in those prisons, what promise will he make to HMP Liverpool?

Rory Stewart: I will resist the temptation to offer to resign on every single issue within my Department, but I repeat that I will resign if I do not turn around those 10 prisons by August. Why were those 10 prisons chosen? They largely focus on Yorkshire and London. There are many other challenged prisons in the system. Which is challenged day by day alternates a great deal—it depends on the particular population—but I do not think that anybody would suggest that prisons such as Wormwood Scrubs, Nottingham and Leeds, which are among the 10 prisons, are not very seriously challenged prisons.

21. David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given the £300 million cut next year to the Ministry of Justice’s overall budget, including for prisons such as Liverpool, does the Minister expect to be able to maintain prison budgets at their current level at least?

Rory Stewart: I am pleased to say that, at the most recent Budget—I do not wish to get involved in the next Budget and the spending review, on which I am confident—we got a great deal of investment into the prison estate, which makes a huge difference. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of the future budget, but watch this space and see how our negotiation goes.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Privatised provision of maintenance at HMP Liverpool was to blame for a lot of the appalling conditions there. Despite that, the Government plan to run two new prisons for private profit. I do not expect the Government to agree with me that the privatisation of justice is wrong, but surely we can get a consensus that companies engaging in fraudulent activity should not be able to profit from the public purse. Will the Secretary of State today commit to G4S and Serco not being allowed to run those two new privately run prisons while they remain under a Serious Fraud Office investigation for ripping off the Ministry of Justice?

Rory Stewart: There is of course one important point here, which is that we need to make very sure that the people we work with are reliable and trustworthy. I absolutely agree on that. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that G4S is running some good prisons in places such as Parc and Liverpool. We need to get the balance right between making sure that these are reliable providers and making sure that they protect the public.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): We know they’re dodgy.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman keeps chuntering from a sedentary position. “They’re dodgy.” He is entitled to his view. It is better if he expresses it on his feet than from his seat. He is now fast competing with the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who has been a model of quiet this morning, but who, it has to be admitted, normally shouts from a sedentary position at the mildest provocation.
Offenders’ Employment

15. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help offenders find employment immediately after they leave prison.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Focusing on education is about getting employers into prisons and making sure that the education that we provide is relevant not just to employment, but to local employment. If there is a shortage, for example, of window cleaners in an area, it is about making sure that prisoners can get education in window cleaning. We have launched the New Futures Network, which helps to settle employers into employing prisoners. Getting this right will mean employers learning, as Timpson has in the past, that prisoners can be among an employer’s most loyal, dedicated employees, changing their lives and ultimately protecting the public.

Helen Whately: Women in East Sutton Park Prison in my constituency get to gain qualifications and work while they are in prison, but the nearest parole hostel is in Reading, so some have to quit their jobs after they leave prison. Could my hon. Friend look into this and see whether something can be done?

Rory Stewart: There is a big challenge about where prisons are located, as the whole House understands. It is often very helpful to have prisoners located near the place where they are eventually going to be settled. We are not able to do that in every case, but the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), is leading an investigation into new forms of women’s centres to provide rehabilitation and resettlement for exactly those women prisoners.

Mr Speaker: A sentence from Kettering—I call Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister consider introducing a Queen’s award for offender rehabilitation to encourage employers to employ ex-offenders?

Rory Stewart: I think that is a very, very good idea. We need to recognise and honour employers who do this. A Queen’s award is a fantastic idea. I would like to give credit to my hon. Friend for coming up with it and see whether something can be done?

Mr Speaker: Where is the chap?—Not here. Where is the chap?

Lucy Frazer: I am very interested in considering whether it is appropriate to do that in relation to a particular court. In general terms, it is interesting that although we have closed courts since 2012, the magistracy has diversified slightly, so we still have more women and more black and minority ethnic magistrates than we did in 2012. In relation to the wider justice system and other agencies, I am pleased to have visited recently a police station in Lewisham and a prison in Durham to see how our agencies can work better together, using technology as we progress into the next stage of justice.

Mr Speaker: We are running very late but I want to hear the voice of Cleethorpes. I call Martin Vickers.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Like Scunthorpe, there are reports that Grimsby magistrates court, which serves the Cleethorpes area, is under threat of closure, with the possibility of cases being transferred to Hull, which is a round trip of 66 miles. Will the Minister give an absolute assurance that Grimsby is not under threat?

Lucy Frazer: There is a consultation in relation to remand hearings at the moment, but I am happy to confirm that we are not considering closing Grimsby court.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Conservative decision to cut 2,500 court staff has caused delays for victims and deterioration in the functioning of our courts, but that is just the start; the Conservatives plan to cut many more thousands of court staff in the next few years. Will the Minister commit today to halting those court staff cuts until this House has debated properly the court reform programme, which, to many, looks like a smoke screen for more austerity and which is being driven through without proper debate in this House and with the public?

Lucy Frazer: In the justice system, we are reforming the courts. We are investing £1 billion in that process. That is not austerity. On staff, we are modernising and bringing in technology to make our systems work more effectively. That is in the interests of victims, witnesses...
and defendants. We are making our court processes much more effective. There are some reductions in staff as a result of that, but we are increasing access to justice.

Female Offender Strategy

19. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to implement the female offender strategy. [907521]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Our female offender strategy, which was published in June, is clear that, while custody should always be an option when the severity of the crime justifies it, we wish to see fewer women sentenced to prison for short periods, and we set out a plan to deliver robust and effective alternatives to custody. Last week, the Secretary of State and I announced the allocation of the first tranche of funding, totalling £3.3 million, to organisations around the country doing great work to further drive forward the implementation of the strategy.

Chris Elmore: Today’s Guardian reports research by Dr Laura Abbott, a specialist midwife and senior lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire, who found that some female offenders give birth in prison cells and do not have access to midwives, even when babies are born prematurely or breech. I am sure the Minister agrees that that is a serious flaw in the medical treatment female offenders receive. If we are to get female offending right and improve outcomes, we must start with very basic maternity services.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the report by Dr Abbott referred to in The Guardian, which I read about this morning. I reassure him that our key focus is ensuring that all prisoners, female and other, have access to the medical services they need.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Gentleman in all courtesy that it is almost always a great pleasure to listen to his mellifluous tones; however, there is a very strong convention in this place that a Member does not ask two questions in the substantive section. As soon as he started bobbing in hopeful expectation of being called a second time, the Clerk not only consulted his scholarly cranium to advise me that he should not be called, but swivelled round with a speed that would put to shame most professional athletes. My advice to the hon. Gentleman is that if he wants to get in again, he should try his luck at topical questions, to which we now come.

Topical Questions

T1. [907526] Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am pleased to inform Parliament that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), announced on Friday, we have awarded £3.3 million to 12 organisations to help to divert vulnerable women from crime and reduce reoffending. We know that a large number of female offenders are in extremely vulnerable positions. Many face issues with substance misuse and mental health problems, often as a result of repeated abuse and trauma. This is the first wave of funding from the £5 million investment in community provision announced in the female offender strategy, which sets out a range of measures aimed at shifting focus away from custody towards rehabilitative community services.

Karen Lee: My constituent Alison suffers economic domestic abuse from an ex-partner, but because of this Government’s cuts to legal aid she cannot afford legal representation to get the fresh start she needs. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss Alison’s situation and explain how she can navigate an underfunded legal system that limits access to justice?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Lady will be aware that we are currently looking at access to justice as part of our post-implementatio review. In terms of the particular case she mentions, I know that the courts Minister will be happy to meet her.

T2. [907527] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What is the Ministry of Justice doing to ensure that female prisoners can never again be assaulted on the female estate by male prisoners who claim to be transgender?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): My hon. Friend raised a very important issue. It is important that all prisoners are treated with respect, but it is also vital that the safety of all prisoners is prioritised. Detailed procedures are in place in Prison Service instruction 17/2016 to do that in respect of transgender prisoners. The offences at New Hall are very serious and we are looking at how those rules were applied in that case. In the light of that, I can confirm that I continue to look carefully at the content and application of PSI 17/2016.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) knows this yet, but I know that he will shortly introduce an Adjournment debate on this matter. His views, and the views of others—which, in many cases, are different—will therefore be heard at rather greater length before very long.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Prime Minister told her party conference that austerity was over, and the Chancellor said that austerity was finally coming to an end, but it seems that they did not have the Ministry of Justice in mind. The Treasury’s own figures—I have them here—show that justice budgets will be slashed by £300 million next year, and that is on top of hundreds of millions of pounds of cuts this year. Those cuts risk pushing justice from repeated crises to breaking point. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as the Treasury says, justice budgets will indeed be cut by £300 million next year, and that these brutal cuts show that we cannot rely on the Conservatives to end austerity, injustice or anything else?

Mr Gauke: In the recent Budget, the Chancellor announced an extra £52 million for the MOJ to be spent in the course of this year. The figures to which the hon. Gentleman referred are in the 2015 spending review. At the time of the 2017 general election, when the
Labour party proposed spending that would increase Government debt by a trillion pounds, there was nothing there for the MOJ. Let us remember that next time the hon. Gentleman stands up and rants about spending on the MOJ.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): A firework factory explosion in my constituency killed two members of the public and there was a criminal conviction as a result. The widow of one of those people applied to the criminal injuries compensation scheme, but was refused. Will my hon. Friend look at the scope of the scheme to ensure that such injuries are included in future?

Edward Argar: I was very sorry to hear about the circumstances that my hon. Friend has outlined. As he will know, we have announced a review of the scope, affordability, sustainability and rules of the criminal injuries compensation scheme, but I shall of course be happy to meet him to discuss the specifics of that case if he wishes.

T3. [907528] Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The criminal justice system is on its knees. The police and the Crown Prosecution Service are failing to make important disclosures in criminal proceedings because they do not have the necessary staff. Defendants are representing themselves, often in complex cases, because they have failed to qualify for legal aid. Interpreters are not turning up because the system is broken. Solicitors and barristers are leaving the professions and are not being replaced. The failed probation privatisation project has caused chaos and is putting people at risk. Family proceedings are just as chaotic. When will the Government do something about our once proud justice system? When will they get a grip and end austerity in the system?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The MOJ is investing a significant amount in our justice system—£1 billion on reform. The hon. Gentleman makes a number of statements. We are currently reviewing legal aid. As I mentioned earlier, we invested £9 million in criminal advocates’ fees in April, and we are in the middle of a consultation and have proposed a further investment of £15 million. We take our responsibility in relation to justice very seriously and are working hard to ensure that we deliver justice in this country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will call a colleague who promises to do something about our once proud justice system?

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Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on the progress of the refurbishment of the prisons estate?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): As the Secretary of State has pointed out, £58 million more has come in the Budget. In individual prisons, we have now invested more than £16 million, which has been spent particularly on replacing windows and refurbishing cells. In Wormwood Scrubs, for example, as I have seen, the whole of the fourth landing on Delta wing has been refurbished. That is good progress, but there is more to do.

T4. [907529] Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): A knife crime epidemic is facing this country, so can the Government explain why four in 10 criminals who are caught in possession of a knife for a second time are not jailed, as the law requires?

Mr Gauke: Since the introduction of the minimum custodial term in 2015, people who are caught for repeat possession of a knife are now more likely to go to prison. Recent statistics show that 83% of offenders received a custodial sentence, which is an increase from 68% in the year ending June 2015. It is also worth pointing out that average custodial lengths are also going up—from 7.1 months in the year ending June 2017, to 7.9 months in the year ending June 2018.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): When a prisoner commits a serious violent offence in prison, will Ministers take action to ensure that prosecutions for such offences result in additions to the prisoner’s sentence, not concurrent sentences?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Of course, the House recently passed legislation to increase sentences for violent crimes committed against prison officers and other emergency workers. It is right that we do so, and these matters need to be taken very seriously. It is important that the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and prison authorities work closely to ensure that we do not allow this activity to continue.

T5. [907530] Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The North Wales police and crime commissioner has made it clear that the growing prison population at HMP Berwyn is putting increased demand on policing. The cost of that is wholly borne by the people of north Wales through the police precept. Can the Minister explain why his Department does not provide additional policing resources but instead expects North Wales police to find this from already desperately constrained budgets?

Rory Stewart: It is the responsibility of the police primarily to work on supporting the Prison Service. Our responsibility at the Ministry of Justice extends to what happens within the prison walls. It is true, of course, that with prisons—regardless of whether they are in north Wales or London—there is additional work, particularly on prosecution, but we do not feel that the imposition of Berwyn leads to the kind of financial pressures that would require a rethinking of the entire settlement.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Lord Chancellor’s confirmation that the female offender strategy signals a shift from custody to rehabilitation. I am also grateful, as it will be, for the award to the Nelson Trust. Would the Minister like to come and see the astonishing work of the Nelson Trust in Gloucester to help former female offenders?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his persistence on this topic, and I am pleased to say that I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), will be visiting the Nelson Trust very shortly.
Mr Gauke: I am very happy to look at what is happening in Bristol. Clearly it is right that debt collection measures are proportionate, and the hon. Lady raises an important point about that. One of the best ways to ensure that living standards increase and debt levels do not rise is by making sure that we get more people into work, and we are succeeding in that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In order to discourage reoffending it is essential that ex-offenders have settled accommodation when they leave prison. What action is my right hon. Friend taking so that prison governors ensure that there is settled accommodation, as is required under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017?

Mr Gauke: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act. It is right that local authorities and prison governors work closely together to make sure that we provide that accommodation. There are three factors that help to bring down reoffending: ensuring that an offender gets a job, has accommodation—a roof over their head—and maintains family ties. If we can pursue all those, we will help to bring down reoffending.

Mr Gauke: As I have already set out, we are seeing more people going to prison and custodial sentences are increasing for these offences following the change in the law. On the question of deterrence, this is in part about sentencing, and these are clearly serious offences, but there are other factors when it comes to the deterrent effect; it is not just about sentences. We have to bear that in mind as well.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): How do we have a “fair and more progressive” way to pay probate fees, as the Minister put it, when the fees for an estate worth £499,999 have risen from £215 to £750, and those for an estate worth £500,000—just £1 more—will rise to £2,500 for not a jot more work on behalf of the Government? How is that fair?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend, as a former Justice Minister, will know that charging fees is an essential part of funding an effective and modern Courts and Tribunals Service and of ensuring justice. We listened carefully to the concerns that were raised in relation to our previous proposal, and we have significantly reduced the levels. This system will lift 25,000 estates out of paying probate fees at all.

T8. [907533] Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Within the last week, two separate Hindu temples, the Shree Swaminarayan temple in Willesden and the Shree Kutch Satsang Swaminarayan temple in Kenton, have been broken into and religious icons have been stolen. Can the Minister confirm that these will be treated as hate crimes and not just ignored by the police, given that they targeted people of one faith?

Mr Gauke: Those specific cases will be a matter for the police and for the Crown Prosecution Service, but if activity of this sort is targeted on the basis of religious belief, that is completely unacceptable and I am sure that the whole House is united in condemning it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think the Chair of the Select Committee should have a second bite of the cherry. I call Mr Bob Neill.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State has a particular responsibility to protect the interests of the judiciary. Recruitment to senior judicial office is a continuing problem, and there is a regular shortfall. He has indicated that he intends to consider seriously the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body. When can we expect a response to this, given that a number of important posts are due to fall vacant?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the shortage, particularly at the High Court, and it is right that we should look seriously at the proposals of the Senior Salaries Review Body. I am not going to put a date on when we will have completed that process, but it is important that when we do so, we get judicial recruitment on to a sustainable basis.

Edward Argar: The proposals in the female offenders strategy, which I look forward to working across the House in implementing, are clear in that they are giving the judiciary alternative routes to custody. We are working on the implementation of those proposals now, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to talk about her specific views on this, if she wishes to do so.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Amazon and eBay are selling tiny mobile phones that are explicitly marketed for their ability to be smuggled into prisons. Does the Minister agree that they are abetting criminality and that they must stop doing this?
Rory Stewart: These beat-the-boss phones are designed explicitly to be concealed. We must crack down on the people who are selling them but, more than that, we have to get processes right in prison. This includes investing in more sniffer dogs to pick up the phones and in better scanners, and the staff having the morale, the confidence and the training to challenge prisoners, inspect cells and stop this stuff being smuggled in.

T10. [907535] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): There were many hundreds of responses to the Ministry’s proposals to close Cambridge magistrates court, but there has still not been a proper response to the consultation. Will the Secretary of State tell me when that will happen?

Mr Gauke: The most important response is that we have decided not to close that court.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given that we have 10,000 foreign national offenders in our prisons, with which new countries are we seeking to sign compulsory prisoner transfer agreements?

Mr Gauke: We always seek to find new opportunities to improve the system, and we will continue to do so.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What conclusions did the Minister draw from any recent discussions with police and crime commissioners about their future role in our probation service?

Rory Stewart: Police and crime commissioners play a central role in the system, so we are consulting and redesigning it to make that role more influential. It will not be possible to devolve fully to the PCCs, but we will design the system so that the National Probation Service chief in each region works closely with the PCC to ensure that their views determine how the system is run.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I was awaiting advice on an important matter, so it was advantageous to have a slightly protracted exchange, but that should not be taken as a precedent for future sessions. Other Members who are standing have already asked a question, but the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has not, so we will have one more question.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Secretary of State recognise that it is intolerable that employment and support allowance claimants at the Norwich tribunal are waiting 40 weeks—nine months—for their appeal hearing, and that personal independence payment claimants are waiting six months, particularly when 71% of those appeals are successful? What is he doing to change that?

Mr Gauke: We work with the Department for Work and Pensions on such matters. If I recall correctly, there has been, over a period, progress in bringing down some of the lengths of time, but I will happily look into the matter and write to the right hon. Gentleman.
Points of Order

12.46 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would not normally make a point of order like this, but I wonder whether you have received any indication from a Department for International Development Minister about their intention to make a statement regarding the UK’s continued membership of UNESCO. Reports in the press today suggest that the Government are actively considering withdrawing from the organisation, which supports the culture of our cities, sites of historical interest, and academics in the UK and around the world—not least the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration at the University of Glasgow in my constituency. Surely such a major decision should be communicated to the House first, not leaked in the press, so what means are open to us to ensure that a Minister comes to the House to justify the decision—if indeed a decision has been made?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of it. Before I say anything else, I might add that we are of course in a UNESCO world heritage site ourselves, which is a source of some pride to the House. I have received no indication that the Secretary of State for International Development intends to make a statement on the matter, nor have I received any indication that any other Minister intends to do so, but the hon. Gentleman’s observations will have been heard loudly and clearly on the Treasury Bench. If there is a need for a statement, I trust that a Minister will volunteer it. In the absence of any such indication, the hon. Gentleman knows the devices and instruments that are available to him to try to secure parliamentary attention to the matter in question.

I had been expecting a point of order from another hon. Gentleman—

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah. It is the hon. Gentleman’s choice; he should not feel obliged.

Jonathan Edwards: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am extremely grateful to you for accepting this point of order. On Second Reading of the Finance (No. 3) Bill yesterday, it was brought to my attention that a fellow Member of this House, rather than engaging with the substance of the issue being discussed, chose to make disparaging remarks about my accent. It is unfortunately not the first such incident in this place. There was a well-documented incident a few weeks ago involving a Scottish Member of Parliament. This House is meant to be representative of all the nations, accents and backgrounds of the British state, and such behaviour serves only to reinforce the perception of Westminster politics as privileged and exclusive. Mocking an accent is a serious matter, as it ultimately undermines the identity of an individual or a group. I seek your advice as to whether such behaviour—a Member mocking the accent of another Member of this House—is befitting of this place. May I also put it on record that I am extremely proud to be Welsh and of my accent?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and, indeed, for his courtesy in giving me notice of it. He is absolutely right to raise the issue, not least in view of our recently expressed determination on how we treat everybody in this place—be that person a Member, a member of staff, somebody working with Members or someone present on the estate for other reasons.

Personal mockery of one another—Members come in all shapes and sizes, with a wide diversity of accents, national origins and ways of speaking—is wrong and, to many people, it constitutes a form of bullying. I am the last person to deprecate good humour in the way in which we interact. I may on occasion myself have caused offence by my extraordinarily ineffective mimicry, for which I apologise. I have been known to seek to imitate the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who has been a friend of mine for well over 20 years. As I say, my efforts at imitating him are usually pretty feeble, and they have always been undertaken in a friendly spirit, but mores change.

I think it is a safe rule of thumb that people should not mimic others. Let us debate the issues—play the ball, rather than the man or the woman. Very specifically, belittling mockery, which I have had occasion in the past to raise with the powers that be in relation to particular Members, is not acceptable. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) is absolutely right about this, and I hope it will not be necessary for the issue to be raised again, or for me to have to repeat what I have in good conscience just said to him and to the House.

By the way, I think that the hon. Gentleman has a magnificent accent, and I think the House is proud of him, because he is a very good example of someone who debates the issues but does not engage in personal attacks. I have known him for many years, and I have never heard him make a personal attack.
Gypsy and Traveller Communities (Housing, Planning and Education)

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

12.52 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about periodical local authority reviews of the housing needs of Gypsy and Traveller communities; to make provision for the conversion of caravan sites into settled accommodation; to require local authorities to provide temporary caravan stopping sites where there is a demonstrated need; to create a criminal offence of unauthorised encampment; to make provision about the education of Gypsy and Traveller children; to require schools to have regard to Gypsy and Traveller culture and heritage in teaching; and for connected purposes.

I present this motion to Parliament today because current Traveller law, created with the best of intentions since the Caravan Sites Act 1968, is not working. My local authority has 40 Traveller sites. Settled residents of the area, Travellers themselves and, especially, their children and many others who live on Traveller sites have all had terrible experiences in recent years. The current policy of segregation has resulted in a failure of integration and poor community cohesion.

We are sent to this place to represent all our constituents, whatever their identity. I will set out the recent experiences of settled residents, Travellers and tenants living on Traveller sites. I want the best outcomes for every one of those groups, and I am convinced that the current legal framework under which we make local authorities work has completely failed.

A growing number of settled residents have recently written to me to say that they are now moving out of my area because they no longer feel safe, as they have been repeated victims of crime, including physical assault, theft from their home and from vehicles, especially vans, and trespass around the home. Others told BBC reporters following my third Adjournment debate on this issue in September 2018 that they wanted to leave the area because of those problems, but are not able to do so.

This disgraceful state of affairs should shame us all, and it should be a wake-up call for the Government to take action. Shopkeepers, businesses and pubs, as well as individuals and families, are regularly raising these concerns with me. Many local farmers and rural businesses live in constant fear, but that fear is also experienced by many people in neighbouring towns. Traveller pones are often let loose over other people’s property, and levels of fly-tipping are extremely high.

I would not claim for one moment that such crimes are committed by one section of the community alone—of course they are not. There is good and bad in every group across our society, but I would not be honest if I did not point out the considerable police activity expended in relation to Traveller sites, a number of which are, in effect, ungoverned space where it is difficult to enforce the rule of law.

When I look at the standard of accommodation that many Travellers and their children are living in, I am truly shocked. In a large number of Traveller sites there is no proper sewerage system, with human excrement flowing into local ditches. Some sites do not even have proper water supplies and, in some cases, neighbouring settled residents have lost their supply of water when it has been illegally tapped into. I have repeatedly raised these issues with the Environment Agency, which has told me that it struggles to deal with them. It is also a disgrace that we tolerate such deplorable accommodation in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

We know from the Prime Minister’s race disparity audit that Traveller children have the worst educational outcomes of any group in our society. I was so concerned about this that I asked the Children’s Commissioner for England to visit one of my local schools, which is attended by many Traveller children, and the commissioner wrote back to me after her visit to say that some children were not in school at all during the summer travelling season, which is when children sit exams that open up their life chances to all the opportunities they should have available to them. The commissioner also said that most of the Travellers talked about their children leaving school when they are 14 to 16 years old, and their educational outcomes bear witness to the fact that the home education they may or may not be provided with is not leading to good outcomes for those children. Education inclusion officers—I have some of the best—struggle to get Traveller children into school. There are also concerns about child welfare.

There is also a third group that we should remember: those who are sub-le to on these sites. Many have come to me reporting intimidation, violence, summary rent increases, and failures to provide tenancy agreements or to return deposits. There have also been not one but three incidents of modern slavery requiring massive police resource on one of my sites.

In order to deal with those issues, part 1 of the Bill would seek a unified planning system by amending the current periodical local authority reviews, which force councils to provide separate Traveller sites. Local authorities would have a duty to provide enough settled accommodation for everyone—Travellers and settled residents alike. Some 76% of Travellers already live in settled accommodation, and I have many positive examples of parents joining formal work and children attending school regularly when Travellers in my constituency have moved into settled accommodation. The measure would end the current policy of segregation, which pits community against community and leads to terrible outcomes for both settled residents and Travellers themselves.

Part 1 would also end the current situation in which local authorities that have some Traveller sites are then told by the Planning Inspectorate to build more and more sites, with a multiplier effect. My authority already has 40 Traveller sites, the vast majority of which are privately run—the authority has very little control over them—whereas other local authorities have no sites at all, which is fundamentally unfair.

Part 2 of the Bill would allow the conversion of current Traveller sites to settled accommodation to allow greater integration on existing sites. Part 3, having removed the requirement of local authorities to authorise permanent Traveller sites, would require local authorities, when there is a demonstrable need, to follow the successful policy of Sandwell Council in having temporary stopping sites, for which a deposit and rent would be paid. Such sites would facilitate Travellers in being able to travel.
Part 4 of the Bill would make unauthorised encampments a criminal offence, as is the case in Ireland, a country that is also subject to the European convention on human rights. Part 5 would ensure that schools would have regard to the underachievement of Traveller children, given that the race disparity audit shows that they have such bad educational outcomes. In the same way as we teach Black History Month in some of our schools, Gypsy culture and heritage would be taught as well.

Overall, the Bill would end the current, failed segregation policy, which causes so much misery to the communities affected, allow current sites to become properly integrated into existing communities, allow Travellers to travel on properly authorised and regulated sites, and take steps to deal with the huge levels of illiteracy and underachievement among Traveller children. It is a balanced, humane package that would end the misery that so many settled communities endure at the moment and deliver better outcomes for Travellers themselves.

The Government are examining the submissions to their consultation on unauthorised encampments at the moment. Although that significant issue absolutely needs to be addressed, it is only one part of a much wider issue of which the Government need to undertake a complete review. For too long, the Government have ignored the mounting evidence of the failure of their current policies; all I see is misery, criminality, mounting frustration and real anger at those in authority. As Members have pointed out in previous debates, there is not much point in getting elected to Parliament if it is not possible to do anything about these issues. Current policy contributes to the undermining of our democracy. I know that the inertia bias or the tyranny of the status quo is a significant influence over Governments of every composition, but we are elected to bring about policies that are truly compassionate, that genuinely work for all in our society, and that are based on the evidence of what is happening in our constituencies. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Andrew Selous, Sir David Amess, Tim Loughton, Steve Double, John Spellar, Priti Patel, Victoria Prentis, Mr Mark Francois, Mark Pawsey, Sir Robert Syms, Ruth George and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Andrew Selous accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 285).

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you received any indication from the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs of whether he plans to make an oral statement on the forced repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar in less than 48 hours’ time? Last week, 4,355 Rohingya refugees were placed on a list for return without their consent, with repatriations due to commence this Thursday. Reports today have highlighted how refugees are fleeing the camps or attempting suicide out of fear of returning to the horrors from which they fled one year ago. Having escaped incomprehensible brutality, and despite this move being condemned by the United Nations, they are still due to be returned on Thursday. As a leader in the international community, an oral statement from the Secretary of State would give Members the opportunity to seek clarity on the steps the Department intends to take regarding the ongoing safety of the Rohingya.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point of order. Of course I am extremely conscious that she has made a substantial personal and professional commitment to this issue. I know that she has seen at first hand scenes that greatly distressed her and would be the source of widespread sadness to people who similarly observed them. I have not received any indication that the Foreign Secretary plans to come to the House to make a statement on the matter. However, it would be perfectly open to him to make a statement in the House tomorrow. As a leader in the international community, an oral statement from the Secretary of State would give Members the opportunity to seek clarity on the steps the Department intends to take regarding the ongoing safety of the Rohingya.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point of order. Of course I am extremely conscious that she has made a substantial personal and professional commitment to this issue. I know that she has seen at first hand scenes that greatly distressed her and would be the source of widespread sadness to people who similarly observed them. I have not received any indication that the Foreign Secretary plans to come to the House to make a statement on the matter. However, it would be perfectly open to him to make a statement in the House tomorrow. Having keenly listened to what the hon. Lady said, and being aware of the situation myself, I realise that it is a matter of considerable urgency if the House is to discuss it. So there may be a statement tomorrow, but in so far as the hon. Lady is seeking my advice, it is that she should not depend upon there being a statement tomorrow; she could always apply for an urgent question. If she wishes to put in such a question for tomorrow, I do not promise it will be granted, but I do promise that it will be very, very seriously considered.
Opposition Day

[18th Alotted Day]

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Legal Advice

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected the amendment.

1.5 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be laid before Parliament: any legal advice in full, including that provided by the Attorney General, on the proposed withdrawal agreement on the terms of the UK’s departure from the European Union including the Northern Ireland backstop and framework for a future relationship between the UK and the European Union.

I will go into the details of the argument in just a moment, but may I first attempt to set out the context for today’s debate? Last December, the Government signed the joint report—the phase 1 agreement. It contained a number of important points, including, of course, in relation to Northern Ireland. I remind the House that the phase 1 agreement committed us, first, to maintaining the north-south co-operation provided by the Good Friday agreement; and, secondly, to avoiding a hard border, including any physical infrastructure or related checks and controls in Northern Ireland. Those, of course, are commitments that will apply “in all circumstances”.

The idea is for a legally binding backstop to kick in “in the absence of agreed solutions”.

That was the commitment made, and I know the Government are solemnly committed to it.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that that report also included a commitment to Northern Ireland specifically?

Keir Starmer: It did. A number of other important commitments were made in that agreement, but I am focusing for the moment on the two that relate to the Northern Ireland border. Since then—and it has been 11 months—a number of options have been mooted to meet that commitment. First, the EU proposed a Northern Ireland-specific backstop earlier in the year. The Prime Minister was right to point out the threats that that posed to the UK. Then, the EU proposed a UK-wide backstop, certainly in so far as a customs arrangement or union is concerned, but that runs into the problem that the EU wants an insurance measure that applies until something equally robust replaces it, whereas the UK wants a provision for unilateral withdrawal—and so that got stuck. A third option has been proposed, which is a UK-wide backstop of some sort, with unilateral withdrawal but with a Northern Ireland-specific backstop as a backstop to the backstop. After 11 months, this is unresolved.

I am not going to stand here and pretend that any of this is easy, because it is not—these are complicated negotiations and very serious commitments—but I am sure I am not the only one in this House who feels as though we have lived and re-lived the same week over and over again in the past few months. We begin the week being told, “There is going to be a deal. Cabinet meetings are scheduled. Dates are due—votes are being held in Parliament; there will be emergency summits in Brussels.” By the end of the week we are told, “Next week is decision time.” We have been going around that circuit for some time, and this can go on for only so long. The important point is this: if a deal is reached, it is proposed that the backstop will be legally binding as part of the withdrawal agreement. So it is in the legally binding part of the agreement, not the political declaration. That is a very important provision. Under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, this House will of course be asked to approve that withdrawal agreement, or not approve it, so there is a special statutory process for this House that everybody in this House is well aware of.

On 17 October, it was reported that the Attorney General had been asked by the Cabinet to provide a full assessment of the legal ramifications of the backstop. I pause here to identify and emphasise what it is that the Attorney General has been asked to do: to provide a full assessment of the legal ramifications of the backstop. That is important for later, when I shall get into questions of privilege and non-disclosure.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The right hon. and learned Gentleman will be well aware that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has particular constitutional significance for Northern Ireland. Do he and his colleagues therefore agree that it is of the utmost importance that the people of Northern Ireland understand and have sight of the legal advice given to the Government about the impact on the Belfast/Good Friday agreement of any Brexit deal negotiated by the Government?

Keir Starmer: I do agree, and I shall develop the point about why we are making an exceptional ask today. In relation to everybody throughout the United Kingdom—

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I am just answering the previous intervention.

In relation to everybody throughout the United Kingdom, but particularly those in Northern Ireland, this is an important measure, as it is to all those who represent people in Northern Ireland.

Sir Oliver Heald rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way in just a minute.

Sir Oliver Heald rose—

Keir Starmer: All right.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am very grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for giving way. Does he not accept that with a live negotiation continuing, the Attorney
General is giving legal advice about the situation, probably with several options? That is the sort of advice that is never revealed. It is of course different if we get to the point at which a decision has been made and that decision is being presented to the House, which is when the Government would always justify their legal position, but to give away the Attorney General’s legal advice while the negotiations are still continuing would be completely unacceptable.

**Keir Starmer** (Con): I understand the point made by the right hon. and learned Gentleman—I had the privilege of working with him when I was Director of Public Prosecutions—and I shall address that directly, because I do understand the distinction between legal advice that is being given in real time and legal advice that may come to be given when a backstop is agreed and presented. [Interruption.] I will address that directly to make it absolutely clear what we are asking for, but I recognise the distinction that is being made and shall address it in due course—

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (Con): But even on the basis of that distinction—

**Keir Starmer** (Con): Perhaps it is better if I actually get to the distinction between real-life legal advice given in real time and the sort of advice that may be presented when the deal is being put to Parliament. I will deal with it, I am well aware of it and I know the distinction between the two. If I duck it, I am sure to be challenged later. Let me make some progress.

The chronology is this: as I said, on 17 October the Attorney General was asked by the Cabinet to provide a full assessment of the legal ramifications of the backstop. A few weeks later, on 6 November, it was reported that the Cabinet had been provided with a summary of the Attorney General’s advice on the options for the backstop. It was also reported that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wanted to see the advice in full. There is no doubt that there will be final legal advice if the Government are able to reach an agreement with the EU. It is that final advice that we want to see, and I shall develop precisely what I mean by that in just a moment.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Con): Just like the Environment Secretary, we want to see it in full. Let me make it clear: we do recognise and understand the convention that Government legal advice should normally remain confidential, and that in ordinary circumstances it would not be appropriate to publish full advice, for good reason. But today I wish to make four points as to why in this case that convention should not apply. I shall summarise them and then develop them. The first is the unprecedented nature of the Brexit decision. It is both legally and technically complex and it is of huge importance across the United Kingdom. This is not just another vote.

Secondly, the nature of the advice we are asking to see is general and different from other advice that the Law Officers give. That is important when we consider the convention on confidentiality and legal professional privilege.

Thirdly, although legal professional privilege can attach to legal advice given by the Law Officers, it operates differently in relation to their advice from how it operates in relation to the advice of other lawyers. I shall develop that point.

Fourthly, what cannot be allowed to happen is that the advice, or bits of it, are shown to some Members of Parliament outside Government and not others, in order to persuade them about the deal or the backstop. In other words, once the disclosure goes beyond the Government, or in this case the Cabinet—if it does; I am not suggesting that it has at this stage—it must then be made available to everybody.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

**Keir Starmer** (Con): Let me just make this point, because I have been challenged on it twice. It is a fair challenge and I need to meet it.

What we are calling for today is the publication of the final advice provided by the Attorney General to the Cabinet concerning the terms of any withdrawal agreement. The final advice. [Interruption.] I am making clear what we are asking for. I am at the Dispatch Box, I am on record, and I know precisely the importance of the words that I am now putting on record.

We are calling for, first, the publication of the final advice provided by the Attorney General to the Cabinet concerning the terms of any withdrawal agreement; secondly, that this should be made available to all MPs; and thirdly, that it should be made available after any withdrawal agreement is reached with the EU, but in good time to allow proper consideration before MPs are asked to vote on the deal. So, it is the final advice, it is available to every MP, and it is available at the point at which the final proposed withdrawal agreement that has been agreed with the EU is being put to this House for this House to consider.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

**Anna Soubry** (Con): I shall give way in just one minute. We are not calling for legal advice to be published in its draft form, or as it is given between now and then, or on a rolling basis.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek clarification, because presumably we are going to be asked to vote on the motion on the Humble Address, which clearly says, “that the following papers be laid before Parliament: any legal advice in full”.

It says “any legal advice”, yet the shadow Secretary of State is now defining the legal advice that he wants to present. What are we to vote on, Mr Speaker?

**Mr Speaker**: How the Government respond to a motion, if it is passed by the House, is a matter for the Government. I do not think we need to invest this with greater complexity than is warranted. The motion is
clear and people can make their assessment of it. The shadow Secretary of State has made it clear that it is the final advice that he is seeking. It is perfectly possible for a Member, in the course of a speech, to develop an argument. By definition, that speech and the development of that argument will involve the use of a greater number of words than are contained in a simple motion. How the Government respond to the motion, if it is passed, is then in the first instance a matter for the Government. It is probably best if we now proceed with the debate—

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Very well.

Victoria Prentis: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise, but I remain slightly confused by the difference by the difference between what the shadow Secretary of State said and what is in the motion. I wonder whether you could help me. I would specifically like to know whether the motion relates to the legal advice being provided just to MPs or to its being made public and laid before Parliament, which is what it appears to say.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. It might profit her and all Members of the House if they listen to the development of the argument in which the shadow Secretary of State is engaged. Frankly, it is not really very confusing at all. There is a motion, and Members can read the motion and form their own view of it. People can presumably listen to a speech and form their view of the speech. In fact, it is really so very simple that only an extraordinarily clever and sophisticated person could fail to grasp it.

Keir Starmer: Let me clarify the position, and then, as I indicated, I will give way. Just to be clear: it is the publication of the final advice provided by the Attorney General to the Cabinet concerning the terms of any withdrawal agreement; and that this be then made available to all MPs after any withdrawal agreement is reached with the EU and in good time before MPs are asked to vote on the deal. As for the way in which I put the case, when I last dealt with the Humble Address it was in relation to the impact assessments. I made a number of points from the Dispatch Box that were important to how that was handled afterwards and the agreement that we reached with the Government.

Ms Angela Eagle rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way as I indicated.

Ms Angela Eagle: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way. Does he agree that the unprecedented nature of the meaningful vote that this House will have in the event of a withdrawal agreement being made makes it imperative for those of us who have to make that decision to have access to the Attorney General’s best view and his legal advice as to what the implications of that decision are?

Keir Starmer: I completely agree. The first argument that I will develop is that this is an exceptional case. There is a convention against non-disclosure; I accept that. There are exceptions to it, and if ever there was an exceptional case it is this.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am most grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. I have great sympathy with the anxieties he is expressing about the legal issues surrounding the potential backstop, but surely he would agree with me that the proper practice is for the Government, at the conclusion of negotiations, to publish a document setting out the Government’s position on the law, and, if I may say, if that differs from what the Attorney General has advised, I would expect the Attorney General to resign forthwith.

Anna Soubry rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way to the right hon. Lady, and then I will deal with both interventions.

Anna Soubry: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Can he help us with this? Is this a motion that was drafted by the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, which has subsequently been changed quite dramatically at the Dispatch Box? Is it an intervention, yet again, by the shadow Secretary of State to make good the failings of the leader of his party?

Keir Starmer: As the right hon. Lady knows, I have great respect for her, but I really do not think that engaging in that kind of intervention is helpful in this serious debate.

In relation to the intervention of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the general point, my response is this: this issue of the disclosability of legal advice has been discussed very much in the past two or three weeks. As soon as I started calling for it, I made it very clear, when I was pressed as to what procedures we would use to try to obtain the advice, that I did not want to use any. I invited the Government to indicate that they would disclose the advice in full rather than have this fight in the House, and therefore I declined, three weeks ago, to say what procedure we would use. I wanted the ball to be in the Government’s court. I wanted the Government to see the good sense in putting the legal position before the House, for all the exceptional reasons that have been set out, and the Government have not responded in kind. That is why we are here today with this Humble Address.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will press on, because the first point that I need to make is that this is an exceptional case—in other words, there is a rule or a convention, and there is an exception to it. First, of course, there is the unique importance of the peace process in Northern Ireland, which plenty of Members have experienced at first hand. There are politicians throughout the House who played an important part in that process. I had the great privilege of working for the Northern Ireland Policing Board for five years in Northern Ireland, where I saw for myself the progress that had been made and the ramifications of the Good Friday agreement. That was of unique importance.

Allied to that is the central importance of the withdrawal agreement itself. That critical document will determine the future relationship between this country and the EU, and it will be legally binding not just in international
law, but, it is proposed, in domestic law through the EU implementation Bill. Therefore, the withdrawal agreement will not just be discussed in this House but will become international law and part of our law—a hugely important, exceptional case.

There is, of course, the special procedure in the House, to which I have already alluded, now reflected in section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It is very unusual for us to have that legislative process for a motion on the deal. As has been said, it is critical that Parliament is fully informed of the details and the Government’s thinking. I know that the Government recognise that. They know that all material and detail should be put before the House so that it can consider the withdrawal agreement and future relationship carefully. In the 2018 White Paper, “Legislating for the withdrawal agreement between the UK and EU”, the Government committed to providing “appropriate analysis” before the meaningful vote and went on to say that this information “will ensure that Parliament can make an informed decision about the implications of our new relationship with the EU in all areas.”

I readily accept that that was in the context of requests for impact analyses, but the same point applies: if we are to make a decision of this importance, it must be an informed decision, and that means that the details in every respect must be put before the House.

There is, of course, precedent for the Government publishing legal advice—albeit, I accept, in different and limited forms. The first is the Iraq war. I remind the House that, prior to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the then Attorney General set out in a written question in the House of Lords his views of the legal basis for the use of force against Iraq. He did not publish the full advice before the Commons vote to approve military action, even though many individuals, including me, felt that he should have done so on an issue of that importance.

Importantly, though, in April 2005, the Government did publish the Attorney General’s final advice to the Cabinet on the legality of the war with Iraq. I think there is general agreement now—there is certainly a majority view—that the Attorney General should have provided in 2003 the full advice that he finally produced in 2005, because the decision was so important. Therefore, there are exceptions to the convention in exceptional circumstances.

There is further precedent of advice being made available in the case of other military conflicts. For example, in November 2015 the then Prime Minister set out his justification for military action, including the legal basis, before the House was asked to approve action in Syria. I accept that what he did not make available at that stage was the full advice, but it is a clear precedent for the publication of details before a vote. In other words, when the House is coming to an important moment and making a decision of this kind, the convention of non-disclosure is open to exceptions. This is clearly an exceptional case.

Secondly, the nature of this advice means that it is not the same as other advice that the Law Officers give. The advice here is about what the proposed provisions in a treaty mean, and that is different from the advice that the Law Officers often give. The right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) may recall that, when he was Solicitor General, he gave a lecture on this very topic and set out that the core function of the Law Officers in giving their usual advice was to ensure that the Government and the Ministers act lawfully. That advice is given, as I and many other people in this House know, on a regular basis, and there are reasons why confidentiality has to be attached to it. It is, by its nature, advice to the Government, or even to individuals, on whether they are acting lawfully. They may often be in a position where somebody wants to challenge them directly about the legality of what they are doing. In those circumstances, the rule of non-disclosure applies.

The advice that would be subject to this motion is a fundamentally different type of advice that the Cabinet is seeking, because it is about the general interpretation of an important provision in the treaty, I assume so that the Cabinet can be assured about how it would work. Equally, the House could be assured about how it would work.

Sir Oliver Heald: The point I am making to the right hon. and learned Gentleman is partly about the sequence of events. At the point where the Government have made an agreement and the matter is being put to the House, clearly the Government will need to be able to justify their legal position and what they believe the agreement means. But at this stage advice is being given, no doubt on a range of options, and often the question whether something is lawful is also a question of how arguable a particular position might be, what the various options are, and perhaps what the Solicitor General or Attorney General thinks is the best option legally. Those points should not be in the public domain. It is the final legal position that should be made clear.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, which builds on our previous exchange. I agree; this is in relation to the final advice about the interpretation of the proposed withdrawal agreement and in particular any backstop arrangement that may be put in place.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I am deeply unclear—are you asking for publication of the final advice or of any legal advice in full that has happened during the entire negotiation? [Interruption.] With due respect, I am being asked for my vote regarding the motion on the Order Paper. Are you asking for what is on the Order Paper, which is, “any legal advice in full”—that is, during the whole negotiation? Are you asking me to vote in—

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Lady please resume her seat? I understand that she is seeking clarification, but her intervention is too long and she keeps saying “you”. I am not asking for anything; that is quite important.

Vicky Ford: rose—

Mr Speaker: No, no, no; I think we have the thrust of it.

Vicky Ford: No.
Mr Speaker: Well, I am making a judgment that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has heard the thrust of what the hon. Lady has said. I am not debating that point with her. If she wants to intervene again in due course, she can try to do so, but perhaps she would do me the courtesy of acknowledging that I do know how to chair in this place. I call Sir Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. I have said I think three—

Vicky Ford: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: No, I will not. I have barely started responding to the hon. Lady’s last intervention.

I have set out clearly three times—not for the sake of an intervention, where there is an element of deliberately not listening, but for the benefit of the House—precisely what we are asking for, and I do not think I could be any clearer.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like a number of other Members, I was here when we got legal advice over the war in Iraq, so when the Government come back with their proposals—regardless of the wording of the motion on the Order Paper—I will want to know whether what we are doing is legal. That is the important point for me.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I think that everybody across the House will want to know the legal ramifications of the decision that we are being asked to make, which is precisely why this advice should be disclosed at that stage.

I will now develop my third point, which is that legal professional privilege operates differently in relation to the advice of Law Officers than it does to other lawyers. That is an overlooked legal point, but an important one. Let me give the House two examples. First, legal professional privilege applies in ordinary civil litigation, but in general the Government waive that privilege when advice is central to the importance of the case and withholding it might prevent the court from reaching a conclusion that is fair and in the overall public interest. The ordinary rules of confidentiality that apply to all legal proceedings are waived as a matter of convention by the Government even when they are engaged in civil litigation, which is where such rules would be at their height, if they would prevent the court from reaching a conclusion that may not be fair or otherwise in the public interest. In other words, there is a public interest element that comes into the operation of privilege when it applies to the Government.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland) indicated assent.

Keir Starmer: I see the Solicitor General agreeing; he knows this because he operates this way all the time in the advice that he provides.

The second example is that section 42 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 provides an exemption for the disclosure of information from the Law Officers that attracts legal professional privilege, but it only applies if the public interest in withholding outweighs the public interest in disclosure. In other words, there is an overriding public interest test in relation to advice provided by the Law Officers that does not apply in the same way to lawyers in private litigation.

My fourth point is a very important one. Confidentiality and privilege can justify non-disclosure, but what the Government cannot do is waive the rule for some MPs and not for others. There are a number of important individuals and groups of MPs whom the Government may well find themselves wanting to persuade to back their deal. In order to do so, they might be tempted to share the advice with those individuals to persuade them of the legal ramifications of the backstop.

I know that the Democratic Unionist party in particular—and everybody who represents anybody in Northern Ireland—is very concerned about that for obvious reasons, and I think I am right in saying that its Members have called for the legal advice to be published. It is acutely important to those in Northern Ireland, but I say to the Government that it cannot be acceptable to share the advice, or bits of the advice, with some in this House and not others. Therefore, if there is any proposal or suggestion that it is to be or might be shared with individuals in relation to this vote, it cannot then be shared with others, because the ring of confidentiality and privilege will have fallen away, and there could be no justification for it not being available to all.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware of any precedent for such a differentiation?

Keir Starmer: No, I am not. I think I would be right in saying that if any advice was shared outside the ring of confidence, confidentiality would fall away as a basis for non-disclosure to the House. That must be right in principle; it cannot possibly be right that some in this House have seen bits or all of the advice and others have not.

Mr Grieve: I agree entirely with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. If the advice were prepared for the Cabinet in order for it to act collectively in taking its decisions, but it were then shared more widely outside, I agree entirely that it ought to be shared with every Member of this House at that point.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I had the privilege of working with the right hon. and learned Gentleman when he was Attorney General, so I know how carefully he attended to his work.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend also be clear that this must extend to Parliamentary Private Secretaries, who are not members of the Government and are not bound in the same way under the ministerial code? Ministers tend to refer to bits and pieces of the legal advice, which is why it is important to see the whole of the legal advice in the round.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention and agree on both fronts, particularly on summary or editing. In my time as a lawyer, I saw various attempts to edit or summarise legal advice. Even done with the best of intentions, it can lead to some misinterpretation of the advice that has been given.
There is a convention, but it is subject to exceptions and this is an exceptional case. There is good reason and good precedent for publishing this advice, and it is the right thing to do. I think there is growing cross-party support for that, and rather than fighting this unnecessary battle with Parliament, the Prime Minister should accept the motion and agree to publish the full advice.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for the tone that he is using in this debate. In his penultimate paragraph, it seemed that he came quite close to accepting the spirit of what the Opposition are saying. I am no lawyer, but the House is about to vote on this agreement, with Members carefully considering what may be one of the most important votes that we take in our political lifetime, in the light of what is in the best interests of their constituents and their country. Would it not assist the Government in securing the support of the House if, exceptionally and in a spirit of good will on this frankly unprecedented occasion, they released the Attorney General’s advice?

Mr Lidington: I will come on to the specific issue of formal advice from the Law Officers in due course slightly later in my speech, but I first want to conclude the point I was making about the Government’s approach. I hope that, as my right hon. Friend suggested, what I say will be read as an attempt to find some common ground across the House, even if there is not complete agreement.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Can I ask the Minister something before he moves on? He referred earlier to the importance of providing not only some legal advice but economic analysis. Can he confirm that that economic analysis will include the merits or otherwise of our staying in the European Union?

Mr Lidington: If I may, I will answer the right hon. Gentleman while also responding to something that was said by the Opposition spokesman when he referred to the commitment that, yes, is there in the White Paper that the Government published earlier this year to provide Parliament with information and analysis ahead of the meaningful vote. I want to agree and accept on behalf of the Government that that information and analysis should include not only such things as impact assessments, which the Opposition spokesman mentioned, but a legal analysis as well.

In specific response to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), we certainly do intend to provide an economic analysis. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), will have heard what he has proposed one of the options should be.

Chris Bryant: I am glad that the Minister recognises, I think, that no Opposition Member is trying to drive a coach and horses through the fundamental principle that the Government should be able to take confidential legal opinion and advice during a live negotiation. None of us is seeking to transform that. However, we need to be able to understand in full all the parameters of why the Government, when they come forward with a deal, believe that it is going to be legally watertight and practicable.
Let me give just one example. The Government are saying at the moment that it is impossible to implement the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 until such time as we finish the transition period—in other words, not for another two years. Why on earth is that the Government’s legal position? When every other Government in Europe is able to implement their own sanctions, why cannot we do our own now? We would like to see the legal advice behind that.

Mr Lidington: That particular point is a matter to be followed up with the Ministers in charge of that particular legislation. However, I recall from my time at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office discussions with other European Governments about sanctions policy, and it was very clear that, I am afraid, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman said, a number of EU countries have, while remaining members of the European Union, given up the right to set their own policies on sanctions and rely on European Union instruments in order to give effect to those policies.

Chris Bryant: Unfortunately, though, when the Minister was a Minister in the Foreign Office, he himself, quite rightly, introduced sanctions on Iran that were not being implemented by the European Union, so we are perfectly free to introduce our own sanctions, and if they should be against Russia, we should do so now.

Mr Lidington: In the case of the United Kingdom, we have some sanctions, while members of the European Union, that are applied by virtue of European Union instruments, and there are others additional to those that we have had the freedom to apply on our own. It would probably be unwise of me to try to supplant Ministers in the Department for International Trade and get into the detail about this, but I am sure that the Secretary of State will be only too delighted to listen in detail to the hon. Gentleman’s concerns.

I want to return to the main point that the shadow Secretary of State put to me.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lidington: All right. Then, if the House will forgive me, I will try to make some progress, because there are some really important points that I want to respond to.

Owen Smith: In the light of the Minister’s very welcome admission that the Government are to publish economic analysis on the withdrawal agreement, and in the light of his failure to deny on Radio 4 this morning that Britain may well be worse off as a result of leaving the European Union, could he confirm that that analysis will measure whether we will be worse off leaving versus remaining in the European Union?

Mr Lidington: There will be considerable economic analysis. I do not know quite how great the hon. Gentleman’s appetite for the detail will be, but I am sure that in addition to what is provided by the Government, there will be multifarious pieces of advice and analysis from outside organisations.

I want to make it clear that the Government fully understand the historic nature of the decision that Parliament will be asked to take. Frankly, as someone who feels sometimes as if I have been living through these issues for a considerable number of years, I think that nothing would be served by coming out of the debates that we will have on the meaningful vote and then, if approved, the implementation Bill with people feeling that they were not in full possession of the arguments and the evidence in order to take a decision. When we come through this particular period in our history, we have—all of us, from our different political perspectives—to find a way of moving on, to establish this country’s new relationship with our neighbours, friends and allies in the EU27 and to get on with the debates and the work on domestic policy issues, which I certainly find are what people raise first on the doorstep, rather than the detail of article 50 procedures.

I want to give a commitment to the Opposition and the House. We will make available to all Members of the House, following the conclusion of negotiations and ahead of the meaningful vote, a full reasoned position statement laying out the Government’s political and legal position on the proposed withdrawal agreement, including any protocols that might be attached to it.

In addition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General has authorised me to confirm to the House this afternoon that he is ready to assist further by making an oral statement to the House and to take questions from Members in the normal way. I think that that would go a lot further than the Libya precedent cited by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras.

Ministers are also very willing to engage in further discussions with colleagues of all political parties, including the Opposition spokesmen, about how best, in terms of both substance and timing, we can provide analysis in the form that Members will want and need in order to make an informed decision when that is presented to them.

Lady Hermon: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lidington: I will just refer to the hon. Lady before I give way. I thought it was perfectly reasonable of her to ask for the analysis to include the impact that a possible Northern Ireland protocol might have on Belfast agreement commitments. I would certainly see that as the kind of thing that Ministers should be discussing with her and other colleagues from Northern Ireland, to ensure that we include everything they want.

Lady Hermon: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. Can he be absolutely clear in what he is saying to the people of Northern Ireland and confirm today that the people of Northern Ireland will not be kept in the dark by the British Government as to the exact legal consequences for the Belfast/Good Friday agreement of any negotiated deal by the British Government in good time, before we have to vote on this deal?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to give that assurance, and to say further that the relevant Ministers will be happy to talk to the hon. Lady and other Members representing Northern Ireland constituencies about exactly what form of analysis should be presented to the House, so that people in Northern Ireland can understand clearly both what is being proposed in any potential withdrawal agreement and what the legal, constitutional and practical implications of that might be.
Mr Grieve: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I was very pleased to hear the assurances he just gave as to how the Government would proceed and how the Attorney General would play a part. Might my right hon. Friend also take on board the fact that, if we come to debate this matter on the Floor of the House, it has been a custom—although one that may have fallen by the wayside—for there to be a Law Officer sitting on the Treasury Bench during the debate who is able to respond to any queries of a legal nature that might arise?

Mr Lidington: My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General tells me that he looks forward to being there. It is not really for me to speak for the Law Officers, but I know that both the Solicitor General and the Attorney General are utterly committed to their parliamentary and governmental responsibilities.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for the commitment he just gave, but it sounded very similar to the compromise amendment that stands in my name on the Order Paper but has not been selected. Will he clarify that it is a full reasoned position statement laying out the Government’s political and legal position?

Mr Speaker: That was a cheeky endeavour on the part of the hon. Gentleman. We cannot debate the terms of an amendment that has not been selected, and the House will know that reasons are not given for non-selection; I had to make a judgment about how best the debate was served. It is rather cheeky, but I am sure that the Minister can deal with it dexterously.

Mr Lidington: I have been here long enough to know that one should accept rulings from the Chair, but I can say to my hon. Friend that our intention in Government is to provide the kind of analysis that I believe he has been seeking, but which also meets the requests and calls of Members of all shades of opinion on the European issue, not just in my party but in all parts of the House.

I want to put on the record that there have already been discussions through the usual channels on a cross-party basis about how the Government can facilitate the briefing of Members in every party represented in this House. I can give the House a further commitment that those contacts and conversations will continue.

Kevin Hollinrake: What my right hon. Friend is setting out seems to be more or less what the shadow Secretary of State was asking for. Can he confirm that, if we were called to vote on this motion, we would be voting on something entirely different, which would be to produce all legal advice in connection with this matter?

Mr Lidington: I always try to build bridges. I hope that what I have said is of some assurance to colleagues in all parts of the House. As I said earlier, I think that the motion as worded goes wider than what the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras has asked about in his introductory speech.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras referred to the entrenched tradition of privileged legal advice: in this country, we operate on the basis that advice given by a lawyer to his or her client, whether an individual, a corporation, the Government or a political party, should be treated as confidential. Although he cited exceptions to that, those exceptions were about litigation in court, rather than about the circumstances we are deciding here.

Sir Oliver Heald: Does my right hon. Friend accept that, in giving advice, the Law Officers are often looking at questions of a very sensitive nature with an international content, that it is not always about a case that is going to come before a court in the UK, and that often it would be very difficult for our country if all the advice and various options and what the Law Officers’ are saying about them had to be laid out?
Mr Lidington: My right hon. and learned Friend is spot on. The Law Officers’ advice goes beyond other forms of legal advice in its particular complexity, sensitivity and constitutional importance. For that reason, there is a high premium—higher even than that in respect of other forms of legal advice—on protecting that advice.

The Law Officers’ convention is also a facet of the important constitutional convention of collective Cabinet responsibility. Again, the ministerial code is clear on this. It says that all members of the Cabinet must publicly support collective decisions, but are able within Cabinet to debate and raise concerns privately, and the Law Officers’ contributions to those Cabinet discussions and decisions should similarly be protected, just as the contributions of other Cabinet Ministers or the minutes of Cabinet meetings themselves are protected. That ensures that the public debate is about the Government’s collective decision and the Government’s accountability to this House, rather than about internal processes.

Where the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras was correct was to say that, in the case of the Iraq war and Lord Goldsmith’s advice, an exception was made to this general rule. It is certainly the only one of that nature in modern times that I have been able to find so far. However, it was done some years—two years—after the event, following the appearance in the media of selected verbatim extracts from the advice. However, the key difference between that case and what we are debating this afternoon is that, in the Iraq case, the point at issue was not the legal implications of particular policy options, but whether the Government’s entire action in Iraq was or was not lawful. That was the point at issue then, which is why the then Government decided that it was right for them to make an exception to what is normally a very firm convention.

I believe that, if this convention were to be set aside, there would be an adverse impact on the quality of discussions within Government and of the Government’s collective decision making, which would not be in the interests of any Government of any political party. Whether by means of resolutions of the House or otherwise, if Law Officer advice is made public, future advice is likely to be less frank and candid than at present and less likely to be written down. That is not going to make for good government.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is there not another aspect to this? A number of the Minister’s Cabinet colleagues have said that they did not properly understand the legal implications of what was agreed to last December. That is of course what has led to the dilemma in which the Government now find themselves about the backstop. If the Cabinet were not able to understand the legal advice last December, surely that means they will not understand it this time round and it is important that this House, which will take the ultimate decision, fully understands the legal implications of what is about to be agreed to, if indeed there is going to be an agreement.

Mr Lidington: I go along with the hon. and learned Lady this far: I have set out how the Government intend to discharge the commitment that we have given to making sure that Members in all parts of the House are fully informed and do understand the nature of the legal, as well as the economic and political, implications of the decision that we are facing. However, at no time in our Parliament’s history has any Government operated in an environment where legal advice is prepared for Ministers one week and then made public the next.

I have to be clear that this motion does go against the Law Officers convention, which Governments of all colours have defended. I hope, therefore, that, during this debate, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras and his colleagues will reflect on the assurances I have sought to give to the House this afternoon; will take them in the spirit in which I, on behalf of the Government, certainly intend them; and will, having reflected on these matters, decide not to press their motion to a Division, but to go forward in a spirit of cross-party consensus, so that we can work out together how to present to the entire House the information and analysis that Members on all sides rightly expect to have available in order to make an informed decision on a political issue of this historic importance.

2.6 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to lead for the SNP in the debate. May I commend Opposition Front Benchers for allocating time to debate what is clearly a fundamentally important question? While I agree that the wording of the motion could have been tighter, the Government had to amend their own European Union (Withdrawal) Bill about 100 times in the Lords because the version that had passed through the Commons was such a mess that the finest legal minds in the country did not have a hope of making any sense of it.

I note with some encouragement the comments from the Minister, and it seems to me that there is a way of getting some kind of agreement. What is fundamentally important, however, is that when 650 of us take the most important decision we will ever take in our lives—short of a decision to go to war—every one of us is absolutely certain that we are armed with the best information and advice that can possibly be given.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there are other avenues for getting that advice? I have been approached by any number of legal charities, which have offered advice on many different things, but particularly on the EU. I know that Speaker’s counsel has been extremely generous in giving advice to Select Committee Chairs, and such advice is certainly available to me. I also know that many other people in the House can give advice—not least the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), whose legal intellect is, frankly, second to none. The ability to acquire legal advice in this place is enormous, so it seems odd to force the Government to disclose their own advice, and therefore to undermine their own ability to pursue a case, when other avenues are available.

Peter Grant: I was about to say something very similar. Others in this House are much better qualified than me to decide what mechanism would best make sure that all Members of Parliament have possession of the facts, information and advice that we need. Whether
that is achieved through the exact wording of the motion or a better way can be agreed in discussions elsewhere is not for me to rule on.

I come to this debate with one significant disadvantage compared with a lot of others who will take part in it, and with one significant advantage. The significant disadvantage I have is that I am not, have never been and never intend to be a lawyer. The significant advantage I have is that I am not, have never been and have no intention to be a lawyer. That means that I have no conflict of interest in saying that the law and lawyers are there to serve the public. Parliament and parliamentarians are here to serve the public, not the other way round. In this context, the law and lawyers are here to serve Parliament; Parliament is not here to serve the lawyers.

A number of really extraordinary concerns have been raised about what the motion, amended or otherwise, would mean if it was agreed. As far as I can see, this is not about abolishing the convention that legal advice is privileged or confidential, or about insisting that from now on every Attorney General who ever gives evidence has to do so on the assumption that it will be on the front page of the Daily Express by the next day. It is not about that at all. Simply reading the wording of the motion makes it perfectly clear that that is not what is being asked for.

I have heard concerns from Conservative Members. People are worried that they will be expected to vote for something but then, after they have done so, somebody else will interpret what their vote actually means. Some of us have been thinking about that since 23 June 2016, because that was exactly what happened to 33 million people after they cast their vote in the EU referendum. There is a significant danger that that is precisely what has been set up to happen to us when we are asked to vote on the Government’s deal or no deal. We will be asked to give a commitment to agreeing to something without really understanding what we are being asked to vote for. When something is so fundamentally important, that is simply not acceptable.

We should be under no illusions whatsoever about the consequences of our getting it wrong when we come to vote on a proposed deal. Whether we end up with a bad deal or no deal, the Government’s own analysis points to an economic hit that would be bigger than the crash of 2008, including a 9% reduction in economic growth; hundreds of thousands of jobs put at risk; £2,300 per year out of the pockets of every family in Scotland; the rights of millions of citizens called into question; and, as has been mentioned, the very real risk of undermining that precious but fragile peace that allows people on both sides of the Irish border to do what most of the rest of us take for granted—live normal lives. It would be a criminal dereliction of the duties entrusted to us if we willingly took that decision in the knowledge of the possible consequences and the fact that there was expert advice about what those consequences might be, but did not even ask what that advice said.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My hon. Friend hits on a very important point about the best possible deal for Britain, or a good deal or whatever—I think I heard that on Radio 4 this morning.

The reality is that whatever deal is good at the moment is the equivalent of having crashed the Rolls-Royce and heading down to the car shop to get the best second-hand car for Britain. What we have at the moment will not be repeated—things will be an awful lot worse—but the media are parroting a line and misleading the people. What happens under Brexit, deal or no deal, will be a lot worse than what we have today, and the chickens will come home to roost for this Government very quickly.

Peter Grant: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. My views are perfectly clear: I do not think there is such a thing as a Brexit deal that can come close to being as good a deal as we have just now. If that argument is not going to be rerun—if we are not going to get a chance to correct the mistakes that have been made in the past—so be it, but it is my responsibility, and the responsibility of all of us, to make sure that the Brexit that is agreed is the least damaging that is possible.

I know that some Government Members will be concerned—some have already raised concerns—about setting a dangerous precedent. May I remind them that the Government’s mantra for months has been that this is an unprecedented situation? In an unprecedented situation, precedents do not apply. How can what we do in response to an unprecedented situation set a precedent for what happens next, unless the Government propose to hit us with more unprecedented disasters through their own blundering incompetence?

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Earlier this year, when the Lord Advocate was asked to release some of the legal advice that he gave to the Scottish Government, Mike Russell stood in the Scottish Parliament and said that that would not be done because it would set a very dangerous precedent, repeating much the same justification that we have heard today. Will the hon. Gentleman explain why those justifications made by the Scottish Government were acceptable, but when those same justifications are made by the UK Government, they are objectionable?

Peter Grant: As the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, the two situations are not only not identical but significantly different. Members of the Scottish Parliament were not about to be asked to cast a binding and final vote on the most important decision they would ever take, to take part in a vote that could have cost £2,300 for every family in the country, or to agree to something that would take 9% off the economy. They were not about to be asked to vote on anything, so the two situations are significantly different.

I am glad, however, that the hon. Gentleman raises the example of Scotland, because the “Scottish Ministerial Code” explicitly recognises that there will be exceptional circumstances when it is in the balance of public interest to disclose legal advice—either in its entirety or in part—that has been given to Ministers. Having raised the question of Scotland, the hon. Gentleman has actually destroyed one of the biggest arguments that those on his own side make. If the argument is—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a mildly disorderly atmosphere in the House. The hon. Gentleman who speaks from the Scottish National party Front Bench is,
in my experience, unfailingly courteous and a mild-mannered fellow—[Interruption. ] Order. I do not know what he says on Twitter. An hon. Member chuntered from a sedentary position that the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) is not quite so obliging or courteous on Twitter. I do not waste my time listening to those ruminations, which are of no interest whatever to the Chair. I am simply saying that the hon. Gentleman ought to be able to develop his argument without excessive noise.

Peter Grant: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I was saying, if the Government’s key argument is that it is unworkable to have a set of rules that allows legal advice to Ministers to be disclosed under exceptional circumstances, that is shown to be nonsense by the fact that in Scotland a different set of rules applies, and does so very effectively.

Related to the precedent argument is the claim that Parliament is not allowed to see Government legal advice under any circumstances. Why not? The reason given is simply that we are not allowed to. I would love someone on the Government Benches who believes in the absolute sovereignty of Parliament to explain why this supposedly absolutely sovereign Parliament is not allowed to do anything it likes, because that is the argument we often hear from them. I do not believe in the absolute sovereignty of Parliament, but for those who do, how can it be that there are any restrictions on what this absolutely sovereign Parliament can ask or instruct Ministers, who are accountable to it, to do on our behalf?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Grant: I will not take any more interventions.

As has been said, the last time there was such a significant argument about disclosure to Parliament or providing it with Government legal advice was probably in the run-up to the decision to go to war in Iraq. SNP Members and others in the House argued then that Parliament should have sight of the Attorney General’s legal advice before being asked to vote in favour of war. The SNP was vindicated, as were others. We were shown to be right in asking for that advice to be disclosed, but tragically it was too late for it to make any difference. At the time, Parliament was in possession of the equivalent of what today’s non-selected amendment asks for—the Government’s version of advice, and of such parts of arguments, and of information and intelligence dossiers, that the Government wanted Parliament to see—but not of anything that did not suit the Government. Parliament was given incomplete and, frankly, biased and misleading advice, and it made a catastrophically bad decision as a result. If we are worried about precedent, we should think about the precedent that that might set. I do not believe there is any chance that MPs would have supported the invasion of Iraq if they had been in full possession of the facts that the Government had at the time.

Two days ago, I laid a wreath at a memorial to two young men from Glenrothes who I am convinced would be alive today if Parliament had had such advice at the time it took that decision. I am not suggesting, and nobody should suggest, that a bad decision on Brexit will lead directly to thousands of deaths, but it will lead to enormous financial hardship and huge social upheaval for millions of citizens—perhaps tens of millions—and it could set off an uncontrollable chain of events with the potential to result eventually in the deaths of innocent civilians in parts of these islands.

I want the House to be given the best possible opportunity to reach not the best Brexit decision, but the least worst Brexit decision. In order to do that, we need at our disposal all the advice and information that anybody has been able to provide. If parliamentary precedent or convention, or medieval practices, prevent us from doing our job properly, they have to be either set aside or changed. The situation is too important to allow medieval procedures to get in the way of the right decision. The Government have already set aside the Sewel convention because we are in an unprecedented position. I suggest that the convention on the absolute confidentiality of legal advice has to be varied on this occasion to get us to the correct decision.

I want every MP who shares collective responsibility for the decision we will take in the near future to know that whether our constituents agree or disagree with our decision, each of us will have exercised our judgment in full possession of the facts. We will then be able to take the responsibility for the decisions that each of us will take. I urge the House to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Gentleman completed his oration?

Peter Grant indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: We are immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The House will hear in a moment from Mr Dominic Grieve. I am not introducing a time limit at the start—I think there are colleagues from whom the House will want to hear—but we will have to keep it under review.

2.20 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall endeavour not to repeat what has already been said and to be brief.

First, I entirely understand the motivation that has led the Opposition and the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) to bring this motion before the House. I have, on a personal level, every reason to be deeply concerned about the legal implications of any potential Brexit deal. We have heard enough in the last few weeks to give rise to even greater concern about how it will affect our independence, the integrity of the United Kingdom and our ability to hold it together, and the power of Government in future to take independent decisions and not be fettered by a subsequent treaty to the one we are going to be leaving on 29 March, as well as a concern that those issues may come to a conclusion without being fully understood when we have to vote on them.

I have no idea whether the so-called leaked memo that came out a short time ago was correct or not. If it did come from within the Government, it suggested, frankly, a quite disgraceful timetable by which, on the conclusion of negotiations, the House would be bulldozed into starting a five-day debate and coming to a decision without, on the face of it, even time, as it seemed to be set out, for the Government to set out their position, which I would normally expect to be in a White Paper and supported by the Government’s full legal evaluation of the treaty changes taking place. It is often forgotten
that in leaving the EU we may be getting rid of the European Communities Act 1972, but when we come on to consider the EU withdrawal agreement Bill, if we get to that point, we are going to be enacting a piece of constitutional legislation of immense importance which has huge significance for United Kingdom citizens living in Northern Ireland and the potential to give rise to great public disquiet. For all those reasons, the terms of the agreement we hope we reach will be of the utmost importance. In a nutshell, there is a big difference between a break clause and a review clause, as any lawyer will know, and it will be of the utmost importance to understand on which side of the line any Northern Ireland backstop lies.

That said, I have to say to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras that the course he has sought to press this afternoon is a mistaken one. This goes to the very heart of the relationship between the Law Officers and Government. They are, as he knows, there to stand rather aside from the day-to-day thrust of politics. Indeed, it is noticeable that in recent weeks I should think it has been a nightmare for the current Attorney General. If he goes to have pizza with the Leader of the House, it is immediately assumed that he is siding with one faction within Government rather than another, something that has to be avoided at all costs. He has to maintain his independence. Above all, he has to speak truth to power. That is the absolutely fundamental part of his job.

Anna Soubry: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that at best, given the great force with which he speaks as a former Attorney General, the motion should be defeated and we should not be voting for it? Does he share my concern that I have been told I should abstain on this matter? I do not know why. I suspect it is because there is no majority. If that is the case, who is running the country: this Government or the European Research Group?

Mr Grieve: I understand my right hon. Friend's point. It will be a matter for the Government to determine how they wish to respond at the end of the debate. What I will seek to do now is to set out the reasons why I think the approach the Opposition have taken in the motion is mistaken, and I want to conclude as quickly as possible.

The Attorney General has to speak truth to power. In doing that, he must be in a position to produce legal advice to the Government which is there for their consumption. By demanding that it should be published, we are immediately beginning to skew that process, because it will be prepared with a view to publication. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras made the point that there may be a difference between advice about what is lawful and a survey of what a treaty adds up to in terms of the obligations it places on this country. I would not be at all surprised if, for example, in the course of doing that the Attorney General might not have to respond to questions that have been transmitted to his office through Cabinet Ministers with queries which, although they may be irrelevant to his advice, might pertain to what had been said in the course of an international negotiation with a third party and therefore would be something we would not wish to put into the public domain. We cannot predict how such advice will be put together.

It seems to me that that precisely highlights why one should distinguish between advice that is produced by a Law Officer, subject to the usual rules of legal professional privilege—I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman that if it starts to be published partially, it has to be shared with everybody: on that we all agree 100%—but that should be compartmentalised away from what we should be getting from the Government, which is a full statement of the Government's legal analysis and their collective position. Doubtless, it will be heavily informed by the Law Officers' advice. As I said, not entirely tongue in cheek, if the document setting out the Government's legal position and their evaluation of the implications of the treaty is at variance with what the Attorney General has been saying to the Cabinet in informing them as to whether to accept the decision or not, I would not expect the Attorney General to still be in post by dusk that evening. It would be his clear duty to leave office immediately, because he could not continue to work as a Minister within the Government.

I therefore believe, particularly in the light of the assurances given by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), that in those circumstances and with the assurances he has provided, the House is now beginning to get the reassurance it requires that, first, this process, when it comes to a deal, will be taken in a measured and sensible way, and with a full opportunity for Members to consider the legal implications properly; and secondly, as I suggested, a Law Officer, who customarily can sit on the Government Benches and intervene in debate does so as we go through the Bill to clarify points that may need clarification. That used to be done all the time. I tried to restore it, but for various reasons it seemed to have gone out of fashion when I was in opposition. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General has been pretty assiduous at doing that, and the Attorney General can do it too. That should lead to the House having all the information it needs without breaching a convention which in my view, for the very reasons I have just heard also apply for the Scottish Government, is really important. I do not think it is necessary or desirable that we should be considering such a breach for the purposes of reaching the proper conclusion to these very important debates.

I simply urge the House to consider carefully what has been said and express the hope that it will be possible to proceed in a way that does not breach what I think is a really fundamental and important convention. As I know from my time as Attorney General, it is of the utmost importance that the dialogue between the Law Officers and Government, whom they are there to serve, can be carried—

Sir Oliver Heald rose—

Mr Grieve: I give way to my right hon. and learned Friend.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful—of course, my right hon. and learned Friend and I worked together in the Law Offices. Does he agree that one thing that people
may not be aware of is the very wide range of issues of a legal nature, many of them sensitive, that come before a Law Officer? The reason for the precedent and the convention that we do not put advice into the public domain is that it is very important that these sorts of pieces of advice, on confidential matters of a very wide-ranging nature, should be private to the Government.

Mr Grieve: Yes. The Government are the client and the relationship is between a client and a lawyer, providing completely disinterested, impartial advice to the best of their ability. Of course, on top of that, it is not holy writ either; it is advice. At the end of the day, if the House gets the Government’s statement of a legal position, it can indeed go to other lawyers, who may wish to pick it up, and that, I am afraid, is often almost inevitable.

Angus Brendan MacNeil rose—

Mr Grieve: I do wish to conclude, but I will give way.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Surely if the Government are the client, the client is at liberty to share the advice, and indeed the client should be sharing it, particularly in this circumstance.

Mr Grieve: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, and at the end of the day it is right to say that the Prime Minister can waive the privilege. It is open to a Government to decide to publish the legal advice, but, speaking as a past Law Officer, first I would be dissuading the Government from publishing legal advice for the reasons that I have just given, and secondly, that is a different thing from this House trying to coerce the Government into publishing legal advice. In my view, that undermines good governance and does not serve a purpose that is in the public interest, particularly in the light of the assurances that we now have as to how the Government will proceed, and which, I might add, I shall make it my business to try to ensure that the Government honour—and I am sure they will.

With that, as I promised I would a few moments ago, I bring my remarks to an end.

2.32 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): This has been a very constructive and helpful debate, and it greatly illustrates the power of the House to concentrate the mind of the Government. I would say to the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield referred to a moment ago. When we come to that Bill the House may well be told, “You need to agree to this clause, because that’s what we signed up to when we finalised the withdrawal agreement.” The current draft of the agreement—at least, the March version—is 129 pages; it is already very complex. If there is an agreement, the section on the obligations that we may take on in respect of the Northern Ireland backstop is likely to be even more complex still, judging by the reports that we read.

What seems to be going on at the moment is that the EU is insisting—this goes to the heart of some of the concerns that have been expressed about the withdrawal agreement—that the Northern Ireland-only backstop that it has proposed has to remain in the agreement, whereas the Government are arguing that the UK-wide customs backstop ought to be prioritised, so that the Northern Ireland-only version is never used. As we know, the problem with the UK-wide backstop is that in truth, if it ever comes to be used, it will have to remain in place. There are arguments about a time limit, which I know the Minister understands, and about one party unilaterally deciding to pull the plug on the backstop. Neither of those can possibly be the case, because whatever backstop is applied, including the UK-wide backstop, it will have to remain in place unless and until something else comes along that achieves the same outcome, which is to keep the Northern Ireland border as it is today.

The backstop may well need to be used—how many people in the House actually believe that between now and December 2020, all the issues relating to our future partnership will be negotiated successfully? I bet that almost no one does. Apart from former Government Ministers who expressed great confidence that it was possible, nobody thinks that it will be. Therefore, in the absence of an extension of the transitional period, whatever backstop is agreed in the next day or two, if that is what happens, will have to come into effect. That is why we read that the EU side is trying to get clear commitments from the UK about single market rules, employment legislation, state aid and most recently, fisheries.

The irony is that having initially rejected the idea of a UK-wide backstop because it feared that it would pre-empt the negotiations on the future relationship, the EU then said that it was willing to discuss it, but now it realises...
that it has to work through and tie down a whole load of things, precisely because the backstop might last for a long time and, in effect, become the future relationship pro tem. The argument we are making is that the House, along with businesses and everyone else affected, needs to understand in particular the bit of the agreement that we have not yet seen and what legal obligations we will be taking on. That is the first point.

The second point is the argument for transparency. It pains me to say this, but it is true: throughout the process thus far, there has been a general reluctance on the part of the Government to release the information that we need. I say that as the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, because it is an issue on which the Committee has expressed strong views. I think I am right in saying that this is the third occasion on which a motion for a Humble Address has been used to try to persuade Ministers to give us information and advice relating to the Brexit process. I will not go over the history of the impact assessments that never were or the exit analyses that we did eventually get to see, but suffice it to say that the magnitude of the Government’s choices about their strategy for implementing the referendum decision has not been matched by careful analysis of the impact of those choices. It still seems extraordinary to me that at the time of the announcement that the UK would be leaving the customs union, the Government had not undertaken a formal quantitative assessment of the economic impact of doing so. That was what the former Secretary of State told us when he appeared before the Committee. It is welcome that the Government have made commitments, repeated from the Dispatch Box today, that we will get a full economic assessment if there is a deal, but I gently say that it is far too late in the process.

It is now absolutely clear that the Government’s red lines have boxed them in, which is why we are having this discussion about the Northern Ireland backstop, and were never tested for their implications before they were announced. We are living with the consequences. The reason why there is a problem with Northern Ireland is precisely that the Government said on the one hand, “We are leaving the customs union and the single market,” and then on the other hand, “Oh, by the way, we want to keep an open border between the Republic and Northern Ireland.” As the negotiators are discovering late into the night and into the early hours, it is really, really hard to square that circle.

My final point is that this decision is not just for the Cabinet. Clearly, whether the Cabinet agrees will be important, but it is a decision for Parliament. Parliament therefore needs all the information it requires to do its job, including the legal advice. Ministers have argued that the advice cannot be released, but the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office said that a statement of the legal position could be published. The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield made the really important point that the two cannot, by definition, be different—they must be the same.

Mr Grieve: The thrust of the two must be the same, but it is possible for them to be worded differently, and for one to take account of all the factors the Attorney General was asked to take into consideration and the other to set out the Government’s collective position. That is the really important constitutional point. Provided that there is enough time for the statement to be properly considered, I think it ought to meet the need the Opposition have rightly raised.

Hilary Benn: I absolutely bow to the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s expertise. I was going to make a second point, which may offer Ministers some comfort: also by definition, the legal advice the motion seeks to have released has not yet been written, because we do not yet have a withdrawal agreement. Only when we have a withdrawal agreement will advice be written about what it means, to advise the Cabinet and, I hope, Parliament.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will, and then I shall bring my remarks to a close.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) has just made clear why the legal advice, rather than a report on it, must be published. Remember Roger Casement, who said he was hanged on a comma—any change in wording seriously changes the meaning of the legal advice.

Hilary Benn: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I think the House agrees that there could not be a difference between the two, for reasons that Government Members have clearly set out.

These are unique circumstances. It seems to me that, in his typically elegant way, the Minister went a long way towards meeting the requirements of the motion. If it is pressed to a vote, I hope he follows the logic of his own argument and supports it in the Division Lobby.

2.42 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow all the hon. Members who have spoken so far—they are certainly some of the gentlemen in this House I most admire. A great deal of sense has been talked in an extremely helpful tone.

I should in all conscience say at this point that, as a Treasury Solicitor lawyer from 1997, I provided legal advice to successive Governments, and from 2003, I provided legal advice on the publication of legal advice. Given my experience in the field, I would like to offer a few ideas that I hope will take us further towards an agreement. I hope the House is able to come to a consensus on this important point at this very important time, without pushing the matter to a vote, not least because we have moved a very long way during the debate from the terms of the motion.

The confidential nature of a lawyer’s advice to a client is very well established—I know you have practised in this field, Madam Deputy Speaker. Lawyers do not make decisions; they provide advice. Clients make decisions. The Attorney General is not a member of the Cabinet. He attends Cabinet, and in his very important position—I am not in any way trying to denigrate it—he provides legal advice. The Government can set out the legal position they have come to. The Attorney General can do no more than provide advice given his view. As hon.
Members said, it is of course perfectly possible for every other lawyer, in the House and elsewhere, to provide an alternative view. Only the Government can set out their legal position.

Government lawyers, who I think I may be forgiven for saying are great people who do a marvellous job, sometimes against all the odds, have additional duties compared with other lawyers, as the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) said. They have a duty of candour. They are the guardians of the rule of law and the public interest. I am fully aware that they operate to the highest ethical standards. However, their advice is not of a different status from the advice of other lawyers. It is the same sort of advice, which is covered by legal professional privilege across the piece.

I could give examples of the way we provided legal advice on disclosure in the Iraq and Afghanistan litigation, although I am probably governed by the Official Secrets Act so I had better not make them too detailed. It is certainly true that, as Government lawyers, we went above and beyond—we took our duty of candour extremely seriously—but our advice in effect operated on the same plane and under the same system of confidentiality as that of other lawyers. The long-standing convention that we do not publish Government Legal Service advice or Attorney General’s advice is all part of that.

The separation of powers is at the absolute heart of our constitution. That is why we got so over-excited when a certain newspaper called judges “enemies of the people” last year. That was not acceptable. That is not the proper way for the law, the press and Parliament to operate. It is extremely important if we are to maintain our constitution, which we all profess to uphold so dearly, that we treat those different pillars extremely sensitively and keep them separate. Of course, the Government are often a party to litigation—the essence of my job was to defend them in the courts. The separation of powers is at the absolute heart of our constitution, which we all profess to uphold so dearly, that we treat those different pillars extremely sensitively and keep them separate. Of course, the Government are often a party to litigation—the essence of my job was to defend them in the courts. The Government must not be hamstrung by having to provide their legal advice in public before litigation.

The Minister, who is no longer in his place, mentioned paragraph 2.13 of the ministerial code, which states:

“The fact that the Law Officers have advised or have not advised and the content of their advice must not be disclosed outside Government without their authority.”

I draw the House’s attention also to paragraph 2.11, which demonstrates that legal officers’ advice is special. Written legal officer opinions, unlike other ministerial papers, are of course made available to successive Administrations.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recall that that same ministerial code is clear that Law Officers’ advice is meant to be sought on all critical legal questions, but that was not done before the Chequers proposals, when the Cabinet did not have specific legal advice available to it? I raised that point with the Prime Minister in the Liaison Committee.

Victoria Prentis: As a humble Back Bencher, I unfortunately have no idea what legal advice was made available to the Cabinet. It might assist the House to know that the ministerial code is clear—I cannot remember in which section, but in the same area—that if a Law Officer gives legal advice to the Cabinet, the whole of that advice must be provided as an attachment for the whole Cabinet to read. It is very important in these difficult times that we ensure that the ministerial code is complied with in full.

I pay tribute to the previous Labour Government and to previous Conservative Governments, who worked hard to improve the transparency of the process of government. Great advances have been made, for example in the field of freedom of information. It is relevant that legal officers’ advice is exempted from the Freedom of Information Act under section 42. It is also true that it is ultimately up to the client to decide whether or not legal advice should be published. I am concerned for future Governments, and for future Government legal advisers: I want them to be able to provide the fullest, frankest and most honest advice possible.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Prentis: I would rather just finish, if I may.

I am very concerned about the wording of the motion, which is why I hope so much that we will be able to reach a consensus this afternoon. It is very broadly drafted. It refers to “any legal advice in full, including that provided by the Attorney General”.

Keir Starmer: Let me deal with that point. As with the impact assessments, if legal advice were provided in the way that I set out earlier, the question would arise of whether the order, or the Humble Address, had been complied with. In addressing that question, of course anyone judging whether it had been complied with would take into account what had been said at the Dispatch Box, in exactly the same way as happened with the impact assessments. When those were provided, the question arose of whether there had been compliance with what had been asked for, and that was answered by reference to what had been said at the Dispatch Boxes about what was really being asked for. What I have said is important, because it will be me standing here having to make the case that the order has not been complied with. I could hardly stand here and complain about the provision of exactly what I had asked for.

Victoria Prentis: That is extremely helpful. I wonder whether the shadow Secretary of State will go one step further, and make it clear that he would like to import into the motion the point that he made about the information being supplied just to Members of Parliament, rather than laid before Parliament generally.

Keir Starmer: I have put on the record—three times, I think—that that is what I want and that is what we are seeking, and I absolutely stand by that. Not only could I not properly make the argument if that were the arrangement; I would not do so.

Victoria Prentis: I apologise for that slightly unusual exchange, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: A few seconds ago, the hon. Lady was arguing that if the legal advice were to be published and more widely known, that would somehow compromise future advice. Is she suggesting that the
skills and the general professionalism of legal people would be compromised in future—that they would compromise themselves, and would not give the fullest, frankest and most honest advice because of what might have happened in the past, and would then become different legal people?

Victoria Prentis: That is absolutely what I am saying, and that is the basis of legal professional privilege. It is critical that lawyers are able to give a range of views to their clients about, for example, the chances of success in litigation, and the chances of success if various options are adopted. That is why legal professional privilege exists. It is absolutely critical for lawyers and their clients to be able to speak completely frankly to one another.

Let me end by echoing what was said by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about the ring of confidence. It is important, in my view, that the Attorney General’s advice is sacrosanct and should remain within the Cabinet, because if the ring of confidentiality is broken, that is a very serious matter. It is important for collective government and sensible decision-making that we maintain these conventions, even in difficult times—perhaps especially in difficult times.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have limited time, so I will have to impose a limit on speeches of seven minutes. I call Tom Brake.

2.54 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will keep within that limit.

Let me begin by thanking the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) for securing the debate, because this is an essential point that needed to be considered. I also wanted to put my thanks on record at the beginning because I may raise some matters in my short speech for which he may not thank me quite so much.

It is clearly important for us to get the legal advice published. A number of speeches today have made it clear that the scope set out in the motion might be much wider than was intended, and is therefore to be much more focused. That is welcome.

We are about to make what is potentially the single most important decision that we have made in 50 years, and I think that Members of Parliament are entitled to the greatest clarity on the issue, including legal clarity. At present, clarity is distinctly missing—and not just legal clarity but clarity for businesses, although that often means legal clarity. Let me give an example. A business in Bristol that I visited a couple of weeks ago is finding that its trade in the European Union is on a downward turn because the companies with which it works in the EU have no legal clarity on the position for rules of origin. They are saying, “Thank you. We have worked with you for 70 years and you are a fantastic business, but because we do not know how the rules of origin will apply to our products if we incorporate your components, we are simply going to take those components from somewhere else in the European Union.”

On that same visit, I met representatives of a language school. The legal clarity that they need relates to, for instance, whether children from the European Union with identity cards who currently go to Bristol to take language courses might be required to have passports in future. That would mean that children from Spain, France and Italy might instead go to European Union countries that do not require passports, such as Ireland, to learn English. Wherever we look, there are issues involving clarity.

I was pleased that the Minister confirmed that the Government would provide some economic analysis. He seemed to indicate that that would include analysis of what the Government’s deal would look like economically, compared with our staying in the European Union. I am absolutely confident that should the Government come forward with such economic analysis, it would confirm without a doubt that staying in the European Union would be better economically than any deal that the Prime Minister can produce. I think that not only Members of Parliament but everyone in the country is entitled to know that. If Parliament is pushing ahead with something that will be more economically damaging to us than staying in the European Union, people should know that, and they should be able to make decisions in the future about whom they will support when that is imposed on them.

Let me make a couple of points that the Opposition spokesman might wish to leave, including on the subject of legal clarity in respect of the Opposition’s position. I should be interested to know what legal advice they have received on whether Brexit is stoppable or unstoppable. The leader of the Labour party is on record as saying that it is unstoppable, but the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has said today that it is stoppable. There might be some legal advice behind that, and I should be interested to know its source.

Labour has set six tests for Brexit. The second asks: “Does it deliver the ‘exact same benefits’ as we currently have as members of the Single Market and Customs Union?”

The third asks: “Does it ensure the fair management of migration in the interests of the economy and communities?”

I should be interested to know whether Labour Members have received any legal advice about the compatibility of those two tests. If they have, I suspect it is that the two are completely incompatible.

As for legal clarity from the Government, we need it not only in relation to legal advice concerning the withdrawal agreement. Along with the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry)—I do not know whether she will refer to this today—I seek clarity from the Government about the legal position in respect of the revocability of article 50. The Government have consistently failed to respond to that on the basis that it is a hypothetical question. I would say that for Members of Parliament, it is anything but a hypothetical question. For instance, if we get into a scenario in which we are going to crash out with no deal, the ability or
otherwise to revoke article 50 is not a hypothetical question but, I would argue, a question of life or death in terms of what happens to the UK economy.

I welcome today’s debate on the specific point about providing legal advice to Members of Parliament without being selective regarding that provision, but there is a much wider issue about legal advice and the amount of information provided—whether on the economy or other aspects of Brexit—that we need to debate further. Members of Parliament need to be much better informed about these matters before we can possibly be in a position to take a sensible decision regarding whether to support any deal the Prime Minister comes forward with, or indeed to allow no deal to proceed, which is what the Prime Minister is threatening us with if we do not support her deal.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Like many Members, I am grateful to the Opposition for raising this matter. They are absolutely right to do so, because this is not a dry legal point but something that goes to the heart of the operation of government and, indeed, our constitution. I am also grateful to them for the tone that they have adopted, recognising as they have the sanctity of the principle in ordinary circumstances. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has been careful to frame his argument by suggesting that these are exceptional circumstances, and it is to that point that I wish to direct my remarks.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the context for all this is Iraq, because there is no doubt that hon. Members do not want to fall into the same trap that I respectfully suggest the House fell into some years ago when it allowed itself to proceed with the invasion of Iraq without having in front of it the advice about the lawfulness of the decision to go to war. I venture to suggest that it is now near established that such advice should be provided in those cases—those near-exceptional circumstances—but it is important to consider in the context of this debate what the question is not about. It is not about the lawfulness of the decision to leave. Were it about that, I would respectfully agree, or expect to agree, with the point that the right hon. and learned Gentleman makes, because in such circumstances, the case would be strong. Instead, however, this is about the legal implications of the withdrawal agreement, which is a completely different animal. It will be about the legal implications of the extent to which trade agreements may be struck, the quantum of financial payments, the rate at which they are to be paid, the scope of citizens’ rights, and the role, if any, of the ECJ. That is an important distinction to make.

If one accepts that point, one has to fall back on the question of whether there remains any public interest in legal professional privilege, and I think it is agreed across this House that there is. Preserving the confidentiality of Law Officers’ advice and their ability to give that advice, and to do so fully and frankly, remains important. This is about not only giving advice fully and frankly, but ensuring that the substance of that advice remains confidential. That is the case for good public interest reasons, because Law Officers might give advice about the legal merits of other parties’ positions in the run-up to reaching a concluded agreement, and such matters might be sensitive—and disadvantageous to the national interest, if I may put it in those terms.

I entirely and genuinely thank the Opposition for raising this matter—it is a one that should be considered. While I have listened with great care to the points that have been made, having heard the clarification from the Government, I feel able to vote against the Opposition’s Humble Address motion.

3.4 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First I must say that I am not addressing this issue as someone who is qualified in law, but I am addressing it as someone who represents a part of the United Kingdom that is most likely to be impacted by the agreement that is going to be made with the EU because of the insistence of putting Northern Ireland at the forefront in an attempt to tie the United Kingdom to the EU and its institutions for the long term.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the people of Northern Ireland are looking, most importantly, for clarity in relation to our constitutional position? How might any backstop impact on our constitutional position within the United Kingdom? It is vitally important that we have clarity on that at this stage, and it would be good to know if that was included in any of the legal opinion the Government already have.

Sammy Wilson: I want to come on to that point.

I am sympathetic to the arguments the Government have put forward today: we cannot simply open the door and allow the legal advice given to Ministers to be published willy-nilly. However, to be fair to the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), although the wording of the motion may be a bit broader, he has made clear the specific information he requires, and that information is not the legal advice that will currently be given to Ministers as they go into negotiations and thus compromise the negotiating position.

There is an irony here: no one has compromised the Government’s position more than the Government themselves in these negotiations. They willingly accepted the EU agenda and timetable and sequencing for the negotiations. They uncritically accepted the nonsense about a backstop for Northern Ireland—a problem that does not exist and which can be dealt with by the existing trade facilitation measures in place. And over the months we have had Ministers or Departments leaking economic reports that have been used against the Government in these negotiations. We should be careful about suggesting that somehow or other what is being requested today will undermine the Government’s position in the negotiations. What it will do is inform this House and the people who will be affected by the outcome of these negotiations of exactly how they will be affected. It is important that we have that information.

There are a number of reasons why I think this is an exceptional situation. As has been said, this is an important issue. It is important for the people of the United Kingdom as a whole, because there is the prospect of a UK-wide backstop, which would keep us in the customs union and tied to the common rulebook, or tied to the single market rules. It is also important for the people of Northern Ireland, as they would find themselves hived off from the rest of the United Kingdom and kept as
some kind of vassal state or annexe by the EU—we would not even have the ability to decide what regulations applied to trade and the production of goods in our part of the United Kingdom.

Secondly, this will all be tied up in a legal agreement. Therefore, if there is any deviation from that, there will be reference back to the agreement made, so it is important that we understand what exactly has been legally signed up to, especially as the EU tends to pick legally on all of these things. It is important that we know exactly what the issues are.

Thirdly, the Government have already been ambiguous about what the backstop might mean. We have been told that it is only an insurance policy and it will never be used, that it will be temporary and will apply only for a certain period of time, and that it will be replaced by a free trade arrangement. But what we need to know is, if it is going to be temporary, who will make the decision at the end of the day as to whether or not it is terminated? What will its scope be? Who will adjudicate on it—who will be the adjudicators of that agreement? And if it is only an insurance policy, in what circumstances will that insurance policy be applied? As has already been pointed out, as some Cabinet Ministers say that when this was presented to them in December of last year what it meant was unclear, and it was not even in a legal form at that stage, it is important that the legal implications of the agreement are spelled out for us.

The arguments that have been made today are clear. I share the concerns of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), in that I do not want to see a situation in which some Members have the legal position explained to them and others do not. We have not sought that. If we are going to make a decision on this most important issue, we should know the full implications and they should be spelled out to the public and to the people of Northern Ireland. The people of the United Kingdom should know whether the Government are binding them to an arrangement it would be impossible to get out of, collectively or just for the people of Northern Ireland. They need to know what the scope of that would be, and what the lawyers are saying about it.

For those reasons, we will be supporting the motion if it goes to a vote tonight. If the Government have decided that they will make the legal information available, that will be a step in the right direction. I suspect, given what we are hearing from Europe about the shape of the agreement, that that would expose just how damaging that will be a step in the right direction. I suspect, given that format that stage, it is important that the legal implications of what it meant was unclear, and it was not even in a legal form for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), that we understand what exactly has been legally signed up to, especially as the EU tends to pick legally on all of these things. It is important that we know exactly what the issues are.

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3.11 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this debate. It is also quite challenging, because we have heard from a number of people with deep legal experience, many of whom are hon. and learned Friends, and I am not a lawyer. However, I speak as someone who has a vast amount of negotiating experience. I spent eight years in the European Parliament leading international negotiations—in fact, I participated in more European negotiations than any other Member of that Parliament at that time—on top of 15 years of commercial negotiations, many of which were also international.

As a negotiator, I know how important it is to be able to seek legal advice as one goes along, not just on the final deal but on the deal as it develops. Because of that legal advice, we sometimes change our strategy, and the nuances can have an impact on the final deal. As a negotiator, I know it is important to be able to play our cards close to our chest. Sometimes, if we are forced to disclose our position too early, it can tie us down and remove negotiating options.

It is therefore extremely important that we do not force those on our side of the negotiating table to disclose issues that those on the other side are not having to disclose. These are the most complex negotiations for a generation, and I personally think it is deeply impressive that all parties are still talking to one another, given how complicated the negotiations are. We should not force one side to disclose what the other side does not have to disclose.

The second reason that I am concerned about the motion is that I have spoken to lawyers about the precedent that this could set in other situations. Many Members of Parliament are lawyers, and we know that people go to lawyers for advice on all sorts of things—family law, property law—and that they do that in confidence. It is really important that that confidence should not be broken. We should not force a lawyer to breach that confidence, because that would set an incredibly difficult precedent for other areas.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Lady aware that the privilege attaches to the client and not to the lawyer? It is for the client to decide whether to waive the privilege. We are not asking the lawyer to waive the privilege; we are asking the Government—the client—to do so. That is a crucial distinction.

Vicky Ford: Let me take this further, and move on to the issue of transparency. I believe that transparency is enormously important, and it is important that all Members should understand the full legal ramifications of the deal that is negotiated before we hold our vote. After all, the relationship between the EU and the UK is vital to all of us, and there are highly sensitive areas involved, especially for Northern Ireland, a place that is dear to my heart. That is why it has been extremely helpful that the Government have today clarified that, before we vote, there will be a full and reasoned position on the legal situation and especially on the impact for the Good Friday agreement and the commitments to Northern Ireland. That is absolutely right. Furthermore, I am pretty convinced that before we get a vote, every other QC in the country will have emailed each of our inboxes, and that the noble Law Lords down in the other place will have given their most eminent thoughts throughout the night, which we will be able to read in Hansard. I have no doubt that we will have a vast amount of legal opinion at our fingertips.

Although I support the call for transparency, the final reason that I will not vote for the motion today is that it is incredibly uncertain and unclear. In my experience of international negotiations, and indeed all negotiations, the devil is in the detail. British negotiators have a strong reputation for getting the detail right. I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) for clarifying some of the issues in the motion during his speech, but there are at least four
uncertain areas in it. First, is the motion calling only for the final legal advice, or for “any legal advice”, as it states? Secondly, is it calling for the advice on the final withdrawal agreement, as some people have suggested, or for the advice on the “proposed withdrawal agreement”, which is what it says in the motion? If it is the latter, that would include all the advice given during the negotiations. That is what the motion is asking for, and it is important that we should keep our reputation for detail strong.

The third failure in the motion is that it is unclear whether it is calling for all the papers to be “laid before Parliament”, which is what it says, or for them to be made available to MPs, which is what I have heard the Opposition say they would now accept. That would be similar to the process by which we were able to access the impact assessments.

The fourth problem I have with the motion is that it is not clear when the advice would need to be made public. Would it be during the negotiations, or now, or after the negotiations have been finalised? I believe that the Opposition spokesman tried to clarify those points from the Dispatch Box, but that is not good enough. This is a serious vote on a serious issue relating to the most crucial negotiations of our lifetime, and this type of motion is simply not good enough.

3.17 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Many Members contributing to the debate today have commented on its comradely and constructive tone, and I do likewise. In opening the debate, the Minister made his usual elegant and courteous attempts to assuage fears and reassure the House about the Government’s intention to be clear about the legal and political basis on which we will proceed towards the Brexit decision in this place. To some extent, however, the tone of the debate has belied the gravity of the issues that we are debating. In my view, he did not do enough to assuage the concern that the Labour Front-Bench team and Labour Members rightly have. I therefore hope that our Front Benchers will push the motion to a vote. I believe that it would be inexplicable to many that parliamentarians are not being provided with the full, unredacted, unexpurgated legal basis on which the decisions are being taken.

I do not want to repeat all the points that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras made from the Front Bench, but I will row in behind him in saying that the fundamental argument for publication is based on accepting that legal advice is ordinarily and conventionally provided to the Government in confidence. Indeed, I accepted that when I was an adviser to the last Labour Government, working alongside the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) on the peace process in Northern Ireland. However, we are not living through a normal set of circumstances. This is a set of circumstances in which the right hon. Gentleman, the Deputy Prime Minister, could appear on the “Today” programme this morning and refuse to refute the charge that the decision that he and other Ministers are taking will make our country poorer. It is an extraordinary set of circumstances that we have a Government who are knowingly pursuing a policy that, according to their own analysis, will make our people and our country poorer.

It is also absolutely extraordinary that we are jeopardising the Good Friday agreement and the peace process that it secured. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) was absolutely right to state that the people of Northern Ireland deserve to know, and must know, the exact basis on which this decision is being taken and what the legal ramifications might be down the track. Nothing less than the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom is in question here. As many Members have said, it is not a question of the lawfulness of the decision that the Government are taking, as was the case with Iraq, but it is a question of the constitutional make-up and integrity of the United Kingdom. This seems to me, and I suspect to many in this country, an extremely serious and extraordinary proposition—not a normal policy outcome, but one that all of us ought to view as extraordinary, and therefore one around which we must have maximum transparency.

My final point, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras did not make, is about the context in which this decision is being taken. Brexit was born amid a swirl of lies and half-truths, and one of the consequences of the Brexit decision and of the way the campaign was prosecuted—arguably on both sides, but in particular on the leave side—has been a debasing of our democracy and a fundamental erosion of faith in our politics and our democracy. The end point or final decision has the capacity either to compound those problems or to start to solve some of them and to heal some of the broken faith in our democracy. The Government will fundamentally undermine their ability to do that—to bring a decision to the country in good faith that people can believe in and coalesce around, and that can potentially heal some of the divisions in our country—if there are fundamental questions about the manner in which the information is provided. It must be clear to everybody in this place and outside.

If the Government truly want to build bridges between people in this country, there must be maximum transparency, and that includes taking the unusual, unprecedented step of legislating to allow the full legal advice to be published.
I would not wish to see our undoubted desire for openness, with which I wholeheartedly agree, do irreparable damage to the constitutional framework of our country. I would not want this Government, or any other Government, to find themselves unable to get unvarnished, honest advice because of the fear, or the suspicion, that it might soon become public.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), when he was Attorney General, put it well, saying that “Members on both sides will have the chance to understand what the legal basis for the Government’s proposals will be, but there is a distinction to be made between the Government’s legal basis for action and the precise advice that Law Officers give. For the reasons I have explained, I do not think it sensible in what is undoubtedly an open and transparent democracy to publish that advice.”—[Official Report, 26 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1468.]

That puts the position succinctly, and I agree.

There is a better way of doing this, and I suggest that the motion fundamentally misses the point. However eminent a lawyer is, we all realise that there will be another equally eminent lawyer who disagrees. The old joke is that if there are two lawyers, there are three or four opinions. What we need to scrutinise is not the opinion of one Law Officer, however eminent, but the basis on which the Government make their case—the legal text of the agreement, the case law and the legal practice around which they build their case. That is what we should be looking for, not the disclosure of one particular legal document.

I am grateful to the House for listening to me. The compromise suggested by the Government is a smoother, better way of achieving the openness that we all wish to see, and I am grateful to them for suggesting it. I commend the Government’s course of action to the House.

3.30 pm

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts), who speaks eloquently and courteously, as always, although I disagree with him on this occasion. I rise to support the Labour party’s motion. In doing so, I declare an interest. Like many who have spoken in this debate, I have previously acted as a Government lawyer. I was a standing junior counsel to the Scottish Executive—as they used to be known before my colleagues came to power and changed the name to the Scottish Government, and quite right, too—and have acted as Crown counsel and one of the Lord Advocate’s deputies.

I understand the particular concern that Government lawyers have, but I have also acted for members of the public. I know there is a balance to be struck and that the interests of the Government are not always synonymous with the public interest. In this particular case, I do not think the interests of the Government are synonymous with the public interest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) has already referred to the difference between the ministerial code in the United Kingdom and the ministerial code in Scotland on the disclosure of legal advice. The UK Cabinet Office ministerial code says: “The fact that the Law Officers have advised or have not advised and the content of their advice must not be disclosed outside Government without their authority.” That is an important qualification, and I will come back to what “Erskine May” says in a second.
By contrast, the ministerial code in Scotland has a section about exceptions to the convention of not disclosing legal advice:

“If, in exceptional circumstances, Ministers feel that the balance of public interest lies in disclosing either the source or the contents of legal advice on a particular matter, the Law Officers must be consulted and their prior consent obtained. Such consent will only be granted where there are compelling reasons for disclosure in the particular circumstances.”

The ministerial code in Scotland envisages that there can be disclosure in exceptional circumstances. Having regard to what “Erskine May” says, and having regard to some of the precedents we have discussed today, I would suggest that, in effect, is what is recognised by this House. “Erskine May” says that

“the opinions of the law officers of the Crown, being confidential, are not usually laid before Parliament, cited in debate or provided “the opinions of the law officers of the crown, being confidential, are not usually laid before Parliament, cited in debate or provided by this House. “Erskine May” says that

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“the opinions of the law officers of the Crown, being confidential, are not usually laid before Parliament.”

Erskine May recognises that the UK Government can make the sort of exception that the Scottish Government are entitled to make in exceptional circumstances, and some historical precedents have already been mentioned today.

What I am saying is that these are exceptional circumstances. Again, as my hon. Friend for Glenrothes said, another parliamentary convention has already been ridden over roughshod in relation to Brexit. The Sewel convention states that normally the Scottish Government should be consulted. The Government have said this is not a normal situation, and they may well be right. Of course, there is great legal debate about what “normally” means in the Sewel convention but, by the Government’s position, we are not in normal times.

No, we are in exceptional times. Even if there were no precedent—and there are precedents—it would be appropriate for the Government to publish their legal advice on the finalised deal, if there is one, in full.

In this event, very unusually, I find myself in agreement with DUP Members. The people of Northern Ireland have a right to know this advice in full, as do the people of Scotland, England and Wales. It is this House that will make the decision on whether or not to accept that final agreement, not the Government. They are in danger of mixing up the functions of the Executive and the legislature in relation to Brexit.

Reference has been made to the case in which I am a petitioner, and which is going to the European Court of Justice, on the question of the unilateral revocability of article 50. The Government have fought that case tooth and nail, because they say it is up to them whether or not to revoke article 50, but the highest court, Scotland’s supreme court, has said, “No, it is up to this Parliament.” Just as it will be up to this Parliament whether to revoke article 50, it is up to this Parliament whether or not to accept the deal, so this Parliament should be given the advice that the Cabinet has been given. That is why I cannot agree to the compromise put forward by the Government Front Bench, because it is a matter of trust now. As has been said by the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the process has won on the back of what we now know to have been some lies, some misinformation and, in some cases, breaches of electoral law. Unlike in the Scottish

independence referendum, there was no prospectus as to what Brexit would look like. People have lost trust in the process. If trust is to be won back, this Parliament and indeed the people must be fully informed about the deal that is reached before the final decision is made to endorse the deal.

Legal privilege can be waived by the client, and that is what we are asking the Government to do. In the public interest, in these exceptional circumstances, we are asking them to waive that privilege. I am conscious that I have less than a minute left, but on the compromise offered from the Government Front Bench, I have three specific questions I would like the Solicitor General to answer. First, will what the Government are offering be made available to the devolved Governments? Secondly, how much detail will be in the legal advice that they are going to put forward—will it be sufficient for those of us who are going to be looking at it carefully to take an alternative opinion on it? Thirdly, if the Attorney General is going to come to this House to answer questions on it, will he give answers that are meaningful? Ministers so often do not give us a meaningful answer. In addition, will the Government allow a reasonable amount of time to elapse between the provision of their written document and the oral statement, so that the written document can be studied in order that properly informed questions may be asked?

3.37 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Throughout this well-informed debate, we have rightly heard a great deal about the important principle of the confidentiality of legal advice and lawyer-client privilege. However, it also needs to be said that the Government are no ordinary client and the position of the Attorney General, a political appointment, means he is no ordinary lawyer. Let us be clear about the Law Officers convention on not disclosing legal advice and what it actually consists of.

Reference has been made to the Cabinet Office ministerial code, which states:

“The fact that the law Officers have advised or have not advised and the content of their advice must not be disclosed outside Government without their authority.”

The 24th edition of “Erskine May”, which has been cited by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and other Members, states:

“The purpose of this convention is to enable the government to obtain full and frank legal advice in confidence. Therefore, the opinions of the law officers of the crown, being confidential, are not usually laid before Parliament.”

Then, “Erskine May” specifically refers to the situation where

“a minister deems it expedient that such opinions should be made known for the information of the House”.

Put simply, we on this side of the House wholly respect the Law Officers convention, but it is not the case that the convention means the Government shall not disclose legal advice whatever the circumstances; the convention is not an absolute ban on releasing legal advice given. The Government should not hide behind the convention, because there is clear discretion for them to decide whether or not this is a situation when the advice should be laid before Parliament. It is for the Government to tell us why they want to keep MPs, including their own,
in the dark about the full content of the legal advice on the withdrawal agreement and why this situation is not exceptional.

I listened carefully to the concessions made by the Minister for the Cabinet Office in his speech, but my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) is entirely right to say that they simply do not go far enough. First, we are told that a statement will be published. As many Government Members said, that statement is different from the legal advice. The safeguard that we have been offered—that the thrust of the two documents will be the same and that all nuances and all other things will be included—is, apparently, the resignation document that will be the same and that all nuances and all other things will be included—is, apparently, the resignation of the Attorney General in circumstances in which they were not the same. The Attorney General was not even present to give that assurance; the person who gave it was actually the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), in his thoughtful speech. That is the only safeguard on that that the House has been offered.

Secondly, we are told that the Attorney General will give an oral statement to the House and be questioned by Members, but that actually means that the Attorney General will have seen a document on which Members of Parliament are expected then to interrogate and forensically question him without seeing the same document themselves. That is exactly what the situation would be. The concessions do not go far enough.

There is no point in saying that the publication of the advice will somehow prejudice ongoing negotiations, because by the time it is published, in time for it to be considered before the House votes, the negotiations on the backstop will be completed—if, of course, the Prime Minister has reached a deal. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) made clear, we are asking not for a blow-by-blow account, every step of the way, but for a specific piece of legal advice on something of profound importance. That is what is crucial.

Our constituents’ jobs, businesses, livelihoods and living standards all depend on the outcome of the negotiations. The issue is one of fundamental importance for this House and its consideration of a matter that is so vital for the future of our country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd put it, the whole constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom is at stake. It is difficult to think of a more compelling case for exceptionality and for the disclosure of legal advice. The idea that disclosing it in these most exceptional of circumstances would somehow damage the Law Officers convention has no credibility at all. Indeed, in these circumstances it is right that all right hon. and hon. Members can see the whole picture—that the Government provide the fullest possible transparency. It is an issue that goes across party lines and that is of great importance to this House and its ability to take decisions on the very best evidence available at the time.

The legal basis for the Northern Ireland backstop—if there is one to be agreed—what it means now, and the implications for what it could mean in future, are central to our considerations. It should be scrutinised and interrogated, and the Government have no good reason to prevent the legal advice from being made available to right hon. and hon. Members so that that can take place. Nor should this House ever be content with edited highlights. We need to see the full consideration of the different arguments provided by the Attorney General. The House should be able to consider every sentence and every nuance.

If a deal is reached, the House deserves to see a properly detailed political declaration, to see a full economic impact assessment that applies both nationally and regionally and covers all parts of the United Kingdom, and to have full time to debate. The legal advice is crucial in informing that debate. This debate has wide implications for our politics and affects the lives of all our constituents. It is about accountability and the Government’s willingness to subject themselves to scrutiny on the most vital of issues. I urge the Government to listen, to respect transparency and openness, and to respect Parliament on an issue of such magnitude. The Government have promised the House a meaningful vote. Such a vote requires Members of Parliament to analyse forensically any deal so that they can fully understand the implications of the Government’s position. The Opposition say publish the full advice, so that Parliament can make an informed decision for the future of this country, to secure our economy, our jobs and our future.

3.44 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is more than a pleasure—it is a privilege—to speak at the end of this well-informed, wide-ranging and important debate. May I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for, in the right spirit, reaching across and making a proper and considered offer with regard to the Government’s position? His contribution reflected very much the careful and deliberate argument of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who rightly, and perhaps almost inevitably—he will forgive me for saying that—moved away from the wide-ranging terms of the motion and very clearly set out his and his party’s position with regard to the subject matter that he and other Opposition Members wish to deal with.

The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) rightly explained the context of the debate. This is an extraordinary time in our nation’s history, with grave decisions to be made by this place that will affect the lives of all of us. I readily accept all that, but I do hope that hon. and right hon. Members will forgive me if, as Law Officers have done in times gone by, and I hope will do so in the future, I dwell a little on the particularly important and unusual role that is filled by both the Attorney General and me within this wonderful unwritten constitution that we all have and celebrate. I will not repeat the proper references made by the hon. Gentleman and others to “Erskine May”, the ministerial code and indeed the Cabinet Office code—they all stand on the record and do not bear repetition.

It comes to this: the quality of collective decision making in government is dealt a fatal blow when, bit by bit, that decision making is subdivided, unpacked and, frankly, made almost impossible even in circumstances as important and exceptional as this. The argument that we are now having boils down to whether Labour Members and others in this House can accept the Government’s clear statement that we wish to provide a comprehensive position statement that deals with not
just the economic and political consequences of any withdrawal agreement and future relationship, but the legal consequences of that decision.

We have inevitably and properly focused on the question of Northern Ireland, which the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) quite properly raised, together with the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), who is no longer in the Chamber. We accept all that, but say that, consistent with previous incidences when the Government’s legal position has been set out in a way that has helped debate in this House, that would be the appropriate course of action here, rather than publishing Law Officers’ advice.

Much has been made about the previous occasion when that was done in relation to the Iraq war—in fact it was the only occasion when the full text of Law Officers’ advice has ever been disclosed. It was two years after the event in particular circumstances when, as has already been referred to, the question of the lawfulness of an action by the Government lay at the heart of the debate. We are in a different position now.

Right hon. and hon. Members know that it would be wrong if I were to try to speculate about the content of any advice on this issue that may or may not have been given by Law Officers. I have to remain true to the convention that we have referred to, but doing the best that I can, it would seem to me that using the Iraq precedent, bearing in mind the particular context and the particular circumstances, is not a helpful guide for where we are today.

Instead, I have looked back to the time of a previous Solicitor General, the late Lord Howe of Aberavon—Sir Geoffrey Howe as he was then—who is sadly no longer with us. He was the Solicitor General who took through the accession of this country to the treaties and the European Communities Act 1972. Although he spoke a lot about the legal basis and effects of entry to the then European Economic Community and the other communities, there was no suggestion at that time that any advice that he may or may not have given should be published. That is probably the best parallel that we can draw between the important events of 2018 and the very important events of 1972. If the House can accept that parallel, perhaps it can go on to accept the Government’s position.

The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras sought to make four key points. First, he spoke about the unprecedented context of the negotiations—I agree with that point—and, secondly, he referred to the nature of the advice as general, rather than something specific with regard to an action. Thirdly, he talked about the operation of the convention with regard to Law Officers’ advice and its position regarding privilege. His fourth point was that the advice or parts of it could not be shown to some but not others. These are all fairly reasonable and clear points.

I have already mentioned why I say that although these circumstances are exceptional, there is no reason at all for Law Officers’ advice to be published in the way in which the right hon. and learned Gentleman seeks. However, I want to deal with the point that he makes about—I hope for the benefit of the House—why the Law Officers’ convention still remains important. It is important not just when it comes to legal professional privilege, but because it protects the public interest in reflecting collective Cabinet responsibility. That is a vital constitutional principle. Why? Because it would be wrong and damaging to start distinguishing the specifically legal components of collective decision making. This places the rule of law at the centre of Government decision-making processes and at the centre of the minds of all Ministers, not just the Law Officers, and it does not permit a delegation of those important responsibilities by Ministers to me and to the Attorney General.

As one of my illustrious predecessor Law Officers and fellow “sosbanite”, the late Sir Elwyn Jones, wrote: “the Minister who is advised by the law officers that he cannot do something...is not allowed to say, ‘I cannot do it because the Attorney-General tells me that I cannot.’”

I could not have put it better myself. We are talking about the indivisibility of Government decision making, and I am sure that the House will agree that it is a pretty fundamental point.

It is the role of the Law Officers to guard this principle, however tempting—however convenient—it might be to publish legal advice. We are the stewards; we are here to jealously guard the gate. A decision to disclose Law Officers’ advice requires a very powerful countervailing public interest to override that position. The authority of the Law Officers to disclose the fact that they have or have not advised, and then the actual content of that advice, is rarely sought and rarely given. Contrary to what some people have suggested about the right of the client—in this case, the Government—the content of the advice must not be disclosed outside the Government without the authority of the Law Officers.

In the few short minutes I have left, as I am mindful of the need to move on to other important debates—the Opposition Chief Whip is in his place—I think it would be right for me to refer very briefly to some of the important contributions made by hon. Members. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), the former Attorney General, spoke quite properly and fundamentally about the need to speak truth to power—if Law Officers cannot do that, where are we? I entirely agree with him.
The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) made a really important point about the difference between legal advice and the legal position of the Government. I think he accepted the point that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield made in an intervention. I do not wish to repeat that, but I simply reiterate the point for, I hope, the benefit of him and everybody in the Chamber.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who spoke with authority as a former Government lawyer. She rightly reminded us in detail about the litigation position of the Government and the realities of disclosure, and the particular status of the Law Officers’ advice with regard to the deliberations of Government lawyers. Many other eminent lawyers spoke today—and many eminent non-lawyers as well, Mr Speaker, as I know that you regard the non-lawyer with particular affection, so I do not want to miss them out.

Today’s debate has been about not just dusty conventions, but pretty important constitutional positions. We know that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras fully understands that. Admirable advocate though he is, I could not help but detect perhaps a little sense of sheepishness in his approach to the conventions. I readily forgive that, and I know that it will make him pause for thought in the days ahead. I hope that it can lead him and his colleagues to accept the clear view, and the clear offer, set out by my right hon. Friend the Minister. I readily adopt and repeat that offer. I hope that it will allow the right hon. Gentleman to draw back and, in the spirit of consensus and constructive dialogue, to accept the Government’s position and not press his motion to a vote today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

Resolved.

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, that she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be laid before Parliament: any legal advice in full, including that provided by the Attorney General on the proposed withdrawal agreement on the terms of the UK’s departure from the European Union including the Northern Ireland backstop and framework for a future relationship between the UK and the European Union.

**Keir Starmer:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance and clarity on the fact that the decision of the House that has just been made is clear, and that the Government must therefore respond, in fairness, respond in the terms that I set out from the Dispatch Box. If I may repeat them for the record, the motion requires the publication of the final and full advice provided by the Attorney General to the Cabinet concerning the terms of any withdrawal agreement. This must be made available to all MPs. It is to be published after any withdrawal agreement is reached with the EU, but in good time to allow proper consideration before MPs are asked to vote on the deal. I put it in those terms because it reflects what I said from the Dispatch Box in the debate.

**Mr Speaker:** The House has resolved this matter, in that the motion has been put to it and approved without dissent or objection by it. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely entitled—both in the course of his speech, as he did, and now via the ruse of a point of order—forther and better to explain what he seeks, and there is nothing wrong, exceptionable or disorderly about that.

The ruling I give is simply that the motion is effective—I have been advised thus. It is not just an expression of the opinion of the House; it is an expression of the will of the House that certain documents should be provided to it. It is then for the Government to respond, and we await that response, which it is to be expected will be swift. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.

**Robert Neill:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** One can always rely upon a lawyer to have a “further to that point of order”.

**Robert Neill:** I am grateful for your ruling, Mr Speaker. Will you also confirm that nothing in the resolution detracts from or undermines the obligation upon the Law Officers to consider the public interest when coming to a decision on the appropriate form of any disclosure that is made?

**Mr Speaker:** The resolution is as agreed, and I do not think any violence to the position of the Law Officers has been done.

In response to the Solicitor General, who concluded the debate with his characteristic courtesy and good humour, I feel sure that the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will treasure his tribute to her. It is to be expected that it will be framed, and I rather imagine that she will give it pride of place in her sitting room.

**Ms Angela Eagle:** Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I speak as a non-lawyer. Can you confirm that although this is a Government who do not vote when they think they are going to lose, they nevertheless have a duty to honour the motion passed by the House, because it is not just an expression of the Opposition’s view but effective?

**Mr Speaker:** I hope the hon. Lady will understand if I say that I do not dissent, but I do not really think I have anything to add. I have already said that the motion is effective—it is not just an expression of opinion; it is an expression of will—and the Government should regard the motion as effective and respond to it swiftly. I hope that that is satisfactory to colleagues.
Education Funding

4.2 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House notes the Institute for Fiscal Studies' finding that education spending as a share of national income has fallen from 5.8 per cent to 4.3 per cent since 2010, including funding cuts of over two thirds to Sure Start, of nearly a tenth to schools, of over a fifth to sixth forms, and of £3 billion to further and adult education; further notes the Prime Minister’s statement that austerity is over; endorses the Secretary of State for Education’s recent demand for billions more funding and welcomes his comments that there is a strong case for investment in the spending review but notes that the recent Budget provided only small capital projects; offers its full support to the Secretary of State for Education in persuading the Chancellor of the Exchequer that education urgently needs new investment; and calls on the Government to end austerity, not with little extras but by reversing all cuts to education funding.

I apologise in advance if my throat gets a little hoarse; I seem to have caught the Commons cold that we all have at the moment.

I have shadowed three Education Secretaries, but in the last year it has sometimes felt like two in one. There is the Education Secretary who pledged to do more to support teachers and to end the meddling, acknowledged that funding was tight and said that he was trying to squeeze more funding from No. 11. Then there is the Education Secretary who defends austerity, denies the cuts and spends his time and energy making absurd allegations about our policies, rather than fixing his own.

And then we got to Budget day and the Chancellor’s “little extras”. In the Secretary of State’s recent interview, he visibly winced when asked about those words. Perhaps he can tell us his reaction to the Chancellor’s comments at the Treasury Select Committee, where he said:

“I am sure that for anybody who feels it is not worth having, there will be plenty of other schools that will be willing to receive the cheque on their behalf.”

He has said that schools could buy “a couple of whiteboards, or some laptop computers or something”. That is incredible—he has taken billions of pounds from our schools, and now he offers them a whiteboard. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) put it, “what use is a whiteboard if there is no teacher to use it?”—[Official Report, 31 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 912.]

No doubt, if we did face Brexit food shortages, his hon. Lady asks the Secretary of State where he thinks schools have this money lying around?

The hon. Lady makes a crucial and important point. As I have said, I really think the Secretary of State needs to listen more to headteachers and to teachers across the board, up and down England, who are desperately trying to ensure that the funding is enough. It has just announced a consultation that represents a real threat to the future of special schools, and to the excellent education and great staff in our county.

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend is of course absolutely right to talk about pupils with special educational needs, because the funding for them has been frozen and local authorities are facing significant funding demands. It is not fair that the children who need such support the most are being failed by this Government.

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Schools across the board—whether they are academies or local authority-supported schools—are asked to find the first £6,000 of special educational needs funding from their own budgets. Will the hon. Lady ask the Secretary of State where he thinks schools have this money lying around?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Lady makes a crucial and important point. As I have said, I really think the Secretary of State needs to listen more to headteachers and to teachers across the board, up and down England, who are desperately trying to ensure that the funding is available to support all children. Under the previous Labour Government, every child mattered; under this Government, segregation matters.

The Secretary of State was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) if pupil funding was set to fall in real terms, and he simply said, “No”. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that per pupil spending will be falling again next year, so I give him the opportunity now to provide this House with the guarantee he once gave that not a single school will lose a single penny in per pupil funding. Unfortunately, his Government’s guarantees on funding have a habit of unravelling. The Secretary of State seemed bemused by my idea of segregation, and I understand why: the Secretary of State of course dropped the education Bill that would have brought in more grammar schools, but the Government are trying to do that themselves through the back door. The Government said that they would
fully fund the pay settlement for teachers, but then offered less than the pay review body, for the first time in its 28-year history.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. The Government are not prepared to fund in full the recommended increase to teacher pay. They are leaving that to the schools to find, which is a further cut in school budgets. That means that schools cannot deal with special needs or assist pupils with special language needs in particular. Schools cannot employ those teachers any more—that is the mess the Government have left.

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Of course, one of the myths that keeps being spread by the Government and Conservative Members is that record funding is going into schools, but they do not talk about the record level of costs on schools, which means that schools are facing real-terms financial pressures, and the Government have done nothing to support schools in that regard.

Despite the Secretary of State’s concerns four months ago, he has left 250,000 teachers—most of the teaching workforce—facing a real-terms pay cut. Meanwhile, teaching assistant wages are pennies above the minimum, even as so many of them have had to dip into their own pockets for basic school supplies. Austerity is not over for teachers or their support staff.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have visited more than 30 schools in my constituency where teachers are leaving and it is very difficult for the schools to replace them. In a recent survey the National Education Union found that 81% of teachers have considered leaving the profession. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is clear across our constituencies that austerity is far from over?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Government have, of course, failed to meet their teacher recruitment targets for the past five years and teachers now face a real crisis. The Department for Education told us that the teachers pay grant would cover the cost of the pay rise, but that does not include the first £250 million needed to give staff a 1% pay rise, and the Secretary of State’s own Ministers have admitted that not every school will get the funding it needs through the grant. Will the Secretary of State tell us how many schools are not getting enough to meet the cost? Austerity is not over for our schools.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): A few moments ago the hon. Lady said that record funding was going into schools, but my recent claims on school funding were “presented in such a way as to misrepresent”. Perhaps it is time to open one of the Secretary of State’s centres for maths in his own Department. Of course, there is one subject in which Ministers do seem to value creativity—statistics. The Education Secretary said yesterday that he did not recall being slapped down by the statistics watchdog four times in the 11 months he has been in office. I have checked with the UK Statistics Authority and I have to admit that he was right—it was actually five times. Let me remind him. At our very first questions, the Secretary of State claimed that per pupil funding was up in real terms. He had to correct the record. He said that every school would receive a cash increase. He had to admit they would not. He claimed that more pupils were in good schools. He has been told to stop repeating that claim. He said that we had leapfrogged up the international tables. The stats watchdog said that was “not correct” and that his most recent claims on school funding were “presented in such a way as to misrepresent”. Perhaps he just objected to the phrase “slapped down”. Fair enough. The Times said he was “rebuked”. The Daily Mirror said he was “blasted”. The Daily Mail said he was “censored”. The BBC said he was “reprimanded”. And the Daily Mail said all four. Perhaps it is time to open one of his centres for maths in his own Department.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Both sides of the House are making it impossible to hear the hon. Lady.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps it is time to open one of the Secretary of State’s centres for maths in his own Department. Even better, he could stop fiddling the facts and start facing the facts. There is one statement he has made that is entirely accurate: education needs billions of pounds more investment. Just look at the services that serve us at the very start of our lives.
**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): The current projections are that 71 of 73 schools in Lewisham face cuts, losing £8.8 million from 2015 to 2020. That equates to a loss of £257 per pupil. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is appalling?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Fantastic work is going on in our schools to educate our children, but I am sure hon. Members from across the House cannot go into a school in England today without being told that the cuts have had a detrimental effect on the work they are doing. They are doing tremendously good work, but they are facing real-terms cuts. It is important that the Secretary of State recognises the pressure his Department and the Treasury are placing on our schools.

**Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has quite rightly concentrated the bulk of her remarks thus far on the crisis in schools funding. Will she spare a word for the devastating situation facing many sixth-form colleges which, according to the IFS, have been hit by a 21% cut in real terms? That needs sorting out too, does it not?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I will come on to that, but he is absolutely right to say that adult education and further education have been the most cut and have faced the most severe difficulties since this Government came to power.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I appreciate what the hon. Lady is saying, but she is pointing towards the crisis in schools funding. Will she say something about the crisis in adult education and our colleges and the impact that those cuts have had on our future economy?

**Angela Rayner:** At the general election, we had costings in our manifesto. The Conservative party made no costings and said nothing about the bung they were going to give the Democratic Unionist party to prop up their Government. We have said quite clearly that the Secretary of State recognises the pressure his Department and the Treasury are placing on our schools.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Angela Rayner:** I will move on, Madam Deputy Speaker, and make a little bit more progress. Education needs that investment. Just look at the services that serve the very start of our lives. Spending on Sure Start has been cut by two thirds—down by more than £1 billion since the Government took office—and over 1,000 Sure Start centres have been lost.

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): In Norfolk, the Conservative-led county council is proposing the closure and loss of 46 of 53 of our children’s centres—

[Interruption.] It is a shame. And we know that 75% of the most vulnerable families in our county use these centres. It is terming this a “service improvement”. Will my hon. Friend join me in telling Norfolk County Council that this is an absolute disgrace?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I hope that Members across the House, including Government Front Benchers, recognise that early years are so vital. If we really care about social mobility and want to help every child to reach their full potential, those early years are so, so crucial, yet the loss of those children’s centres and Sure Start centres is so short-sighted that we will be picking up the cost of it for generations to come.

The Government have refused to give assurances to maintained nursery schools, despite the vital role that they play. Just this month, I, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), campaigned to save Salford nurseries. What response did the Salford Mayor get from the Treasury? A letter from the Chief Secretary talking about the NHS. They literally do not even recognise the issue. Perhaps today the Secretary of State can guarantee additional funding when the transitional £55 million ends in 2020 and recognise the valuable work that our maintained nurseries do across England. Perhaps he could use the £600 million returned to the Treasury because parents are not using the tax-free childcare, even as 85% of local authorities take a cut to the funding rate that they receive for the 30 hours of free childcare. Many parents are actually paying more for childcare now, since the so-called free hours were introduced.

The harshest cuts have fallen in the areas that we discuss least in this Chamber. In further and adult education, budgets have been cut by over £3 billion in real terms since 2010. One pound in every four has been cut and we have seen the consequences. The number of adult learners has declined by over 3 million since 2010. Cutting funding for these programmes means cutting people off from a second chance, like the one that I had in my life and which so many of my constituents need, yet there was not a single penny nor a single word about further education in the Budget. Instead, there was the bombshell of £140 million a year of new pension costs for people off from a second chance, like the one that I had in my life and which so many of my constituents need.

Last month, we celebrated Love Our Colleges Week, yet they have had neither love nor money from this Government. The spending review offers a chance for the Secretary of State before us today is the one who sincerely wants more investment, he should have no problems voting for the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), campaigned to save Salford nurseries. What response did the Salford Mayor get from the Treasury? A letter from the Chief Secretary talking about the NHS. They literally do not even recognise the issue. Perhaps today the Secretary of State can guarantee additional funding when the transitional £55 million ends in 2020 and recognise the valuable work that our maintained nurseries do across England. Perhaps he could use the £600 million returned to the Treasury because parents are not using the tax-free childcare, even as 85% of local authorities take a cut to the funding rate that they receive for the 30 hours of free childcare. Many parents are actually paying more for childcare now, since the so-called free hours were introduced.

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**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): In Norfolk, the Conservative-led county council is proposing the closure and loss of 46 of 53 of our children’s centres—

[Interruption.] It is a shame. And we know that 75% of the most vulnerable families in our county use these centres. It is terming this a “service improvement”. Will my hon. Friend join me in telling Norfolk County Council that this is an absolute disgrace?
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): How many?

Damian Hinds: 1.9 million, Mike.

But it is not only about overall attainment, it is also about narrowing the gap and evening the odds between the rich and the poor. Here we have seen substantial improvements since the Labour party left office, with the attainment gap having narrowed by 10% or more at both primary and secondary age and disadvantaged 18-year-olds going on to university at a record rate. This decade, we will have created 1 million new school places—the biggest expansion for at least two generations.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: That contrasts with the reduction of 100,000 places that Labour oversaw between 2004 and 2010—answer that.

Marsha De Cordova: Well, I am making an intervention. The Secretary of State talks about a record number of people going on to university, but because of the £200 tax that his Government introduced, fewer disabled people go to university. Will he address that?

Damian Hinds: We want all people, whatever their background and whatever extra challenges they face, to be able to benefit from all that education, including higher education, has to offer. That is one reason why the Universities Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), works closely with universities to ensure that, and why more than £800 million a year is spent on access and participation arrangements to ensure that access to universities is as wide as possible.

I was speaking about the expansion of the school estate. If hon. Members will forgive me, I will repeat myself. By the end of the decade, we will have created 1 million new places—the biggest expansion in school capacity for at least two generations, in contrast with the reductions I am afraid we saw under the Labour party. The latest data show that there is now less school overcrowding than when we came into government in 2010. The remarkable success of schools is of course thanks to the hard work and dedication of teachers and school leaders—and, let me add, of everyone else who plays a key role, such as school staff, parent teacher associations, governors and trustees.

I recognise that the Government and society ask more of schools than ever before, so I want to take the opportunity to set out the record investment we are making in schools. In the Budget, as well as hundreds of millions of pounds for reforms to apprenticeships, T-levels, the national retraining scheme and children’s social care, there was £400 million in additional capital funding for schools this year. That is additional in-year funding for schools to spend on capital projects to support their own priorities. An average-sized primary school will receive £10,000, and an average-sized secondary school will receive £50,000.

Huw Merriman: It is important that Government Members talk up our record. A fifth secondary school in my constituency has just been rated good—they are now all good or outstanding. That school had a vast injection of money into its capital budget to help make it a good school. We should talk up our record rather than listening to the Opposition.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. I commend and pay tribute to the teachers and leaders in the schools in his constituency, and to him for the work he does with them.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State briefly mentioned T-levels. T-levels will come into Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College in 2020, when the money follows, but its principal, Mark Kent, tells me that its funding pressures will start next year. What help can he expect from the Government next year? Given that the Chancellor did not mention further education in his Budget speech, what will the Secretary of State do about that?

Damian Hinds: As the hon. Gentleman no doubt covered in his discussions with the principal of that college, there is also funding for preparation for T-levels and industrial placements, and for staff preparation. There was also confirmation in the Budget of our party conference announcement of extra capital money for facilities and equipment in preparation for T-levels. I will return to technical and vocational education a little later.

Wera Hobhouse: Newbridge Primary School in Bath is struggling with the maintenance of its buildings and its big grounds. I met one of the Secretary of State’s colleagues, who said that the £400 million would not be available for the maintenance of buildings or grounds. Will the Secretary of State set out precisely what the £400 million is for and how schools can access it?

Damian Hinds: There are published criteria governing how this type of capital can be spent, and I will be happy to provide the hon. Lady with a complete copy. We will be issuing a calculator in December so that schools can work out how much their allocations will be. The allocations themselves will follow in January, and the rules that normally apply to capital of this sort will apply to them.

The £400 million is on top of the £1.4 billion of condition allocations that have already been provided this year for the maintenance of school buildings. The Government will also spend £1.4 billion on condition allocations in 2019-20, and schools can now apply for the first tranche.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: I think I must ask for the hon. Gentleman’s forbearance.

We will have provided a total of £7 billion for new places between 2015 and 2021. We also continue to introduce innovative free schools to give parents more choice.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) almost accepted that the Government were spending a record amount on our
primary and secondary schools. Can my right hon. Friend tell us how that compares with spending in other G7 nations?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend asks an important question. There are many ways of comparing spending on education in different countries, and in most cases the UK is shown to be a relatively high spender. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will come to some of those figures a little later.

Jim McMahon: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: Yes, while I am here—go on.

Jim McMahon: It would be interesting to know what the Government will do to ensure that they get value for money. In my own town they have spent £80 million on a failed university technical college and a failed free school, and since 2012 there have been 16 referrals to the police for financial fraud in academies and free schools.

Damian Hinds: The free schools and academies programme has overwhelmingly been a success, but when there are issues in our schools, whether in the maintained or the academy system, we must deal with them quickly. The difference with the academy system is that there is that much more transparency, so people know what is going on. However, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we continue to develop the system and ensure that it works as well as it can.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The Secretary of State has made a very good point. Facilities are obviously very important—I recently visited a fabulous new school, West Monkton Primary School, which is already chock-a-block—but is not the quality of the education the most important element? We are getting a lot of barrage from Opposition Members, but under Labour, a third of 11-year-olds left primary school unable to reach the right standards of reading and writing. This Government have completely turned the situation around, and that is thanks to the quality of our teachers.

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is, of course, entirely correct. The quality of our education is all about the person standing at the front of the room. It is all about the 450,000 teachers, and I join my hon. Friend in her commendation of them.

Free schools are among some of the highest-performing state-funded schools, and 442 are now open across the country. That includes 41 alternative provision and 34 special free schools, and a further 69 are in the pipeline. Again, parents are being given more choice in selecting the right provision for their children.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: I think I should make some progress. The quality of our education is all about the person standing at the front of the room. It is all about the 450,000 teachers, and I join my hon. Friend in her commendation of them.

Mary Creagh: One of the free schools the Secretary of State mentioned is CAPA College—the Creative and Performing Arts College—which is being built in Wakefield after his Department’s disastrous attempts to move it to Leeds, purchasing a site which it later transpired was on the route of HS2. I am genuinely grateful, but that did overshadow last year’s general election to quite some degree. When I looked at the plans for the new free school, I was dismayed to learn that new schools are not being built to BREEAM—Building Research Establishment environmental assessment method—standards, which are the highest environmental standards. Will the right hon. Gentleman look at why that is, and make sure that all new schools and refurbishment projects meet environmental standards, since kids are going to be taught in them for the next 100 years?

Damian Hinds: The Education and Skills Funding Agency follows high standards, but I will be happy to follow up with the hon. Lady separately on some of the specific issues she mentions.

As we were discussing, spending on schools is high by historical standards. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, real-terms per-pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000 and more than 70% higher than in 1990.

Several hon. Members rose—

Damian Hinds: I ask colleagues for forbearance: I have given way many times and do not want to try your patience too much, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the length of my speech. Well, I believe we are having a debate.

Funding for the average primary school class of 27 this year is £132,000, which is £8,000 more in real terms than a decade ago. The same children will be funded at an average of £171,000 when they move to secondary school, a real-terms rise of £10,000 compared with a decade ago.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that there are pressures on all authorities in providing for children with special needs fulfilling the potential of all children. So it is right that this Government have prioritised education spending, and that our schools are receiving record investment.

The total core schools and high needs budget, which was almost £41 billion last year, will reach a record £43.5 billion by 2020. That is thanks to an additional £1.3 billion put into core schools funding in July 2017 over and above the plans set out at the previous spending review.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): One of the biggest education funding challenges for areas like Warwickshire is that the last Labour Government left office with a massive gap between funding for metropolitan areas and funding for county areas. What is my right hon. Friend doing to address that, and what will that mean for areas such as Warwickshire?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. For that question, and I will come on to questions about the fairer national funding formula that we have put in place.

Mary Creagh: The Education and Skills Funding Agency follows high standards, but I will be happy to follow up with the hon. Lady separately on some of the specific issues she mentions.

As we were discussing, spending on schools is high by historical standards. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, real-terms per-pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000 and more than 70% higher than in 1990.
and disabilities. The cabinet member for education in Durham, Olwyn Gunn, has written to the Secretary of State highlighting the plight of Durham, which had a £4.7 million overspend last year and is projected to spend even more this year. What is the Secretary of State doing to help authorities tackle the demand that many are now facing in providing for special educational needs?

**Damian Hinds:** I do recognise that issue; there are additional demands. We are putting in place some extra capital and there are special free schools, but I recognise that this is a wider issue, and I will say a little more about it later.

UK spending is also high by international standards. According to the latest OECD data—from the 2018 “Education at a Glance” report, which refers to data from 2015, the last year for which comparable data for the various countries are available—on state spending on primary and secondary education, in terms of proportion of GDP the UK was the highest spender in the G7. Our spending was higher than that of the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan. We were also higher on that measure than countries outside the G7, including Australia, the Netherlands, Spain and Ireland. On a per pupil level, the UK ranked lower than the US but above in line with all the other G7 nations.

As well as ensuring record levels of funding for our schools overall, this Government have taken on the historic challenge of introducing a national funding formula to distribute the money more fairly—something that was ducked by previous Governments. For example, Coventry previously received £510 more per pupil than Plymouth, despite having the same proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals. Nottingham similarly attracted £555 more than Halton—

**Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab):** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Damian Hinds:** No, I am sorry.

This year, we have given every local authority more money in cash terms for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that have been most underfunded. It is also worth highlighting some of the funding that schools receive on top of what is distributed through the new funding formula. That includes £2.4 billion this year in pupil premium funding and £600 million per year for universal infant free school meals. We have also estimated that, through the roll-out of universal credit, around 50,000 more children will benefit from a free school meal by 2022, compared with under the previous benefits system, and that even more will benefit in the meantime through transitional protections. I regret to have to say that that stands in stark contrast to the scaremongering and wholly misleading accusations made by the Opposition about eligibility.

Through the primary PE and sport premium, we have invested more than £1 billion of ring-fenced funding in primary schools to improve PE and sport since 2013. The soft drinks industry levy is also enabling us to put up to £26 million into breakfast clubs in the most deprived areas. To fund the biggest increase to teachers’ pay since 2011, our teachers pay grant of £508 million over two years will cover the difference between this award and the cost of the 1% award that schools would previously have been planning for. We are also proposing to fund the additional pressure that the increase in pension contributions will place on budgets next September, for the schools as well as the further education and sixth-form colleges that are affected.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Damian Hinds:** I am spoiled for choice. I will give way to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali).

**Rushanara Ali:** Earlier, the Secretary of State mentioned per pupil funding. In my constituency, per pupil funding will be cut by an average of £448 per pupil. Can he tell me why he is doing that, in an area with the highest child poverty rate in the country?

**Damian Hinds:** Through the funding formula, additional moneys in cash terms are allocated to each local authority for each child. I believe it is right that the local authority is then able to make adjustments—for example, to cope with the pressures on the high-needs budget for children with special educational needs and disabilities. The local authority has the ability to do that, and I think that that is right.

**Paul Farrelly:** The Secretary of State has just mentioned help for colleges, as well as schools, with pension pressures. Will he extend that help to provide assistance with pay rises, so that there is no discrimination between colleges and schools? Will he also confirm that all colleges, not just sixth-form colleges and schools, will be eligible for the pot provided for the “little extras”, including Newcastle and Stafford College?

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there are differences in how colleges are constituted. In particular, independent colleges are not subject to the pay and conditions arrangements of schoolteachers, but they are typically in the teachers’ pension scheme—hence that difference.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):** I acknowledge the record amount of money that is going into schools, but we came up with that funding in order to have a national funding formula. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that in low-funding authorities such as Gloucestershire, a minimum amount of national funding should mean exactly that? Gloucestershire is about to top-slice its budget by 0.5%, so will he look at this and see what can be done?

**Damian Hinds:** I recognise what my hon. Friend says, and he is right. I thank him for acknowledging the additional money that has gone in, the fairer national funding formula and the additional £1.3 billion in resourcing. It is also true, as I was saying in answer to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), that local authorities can move money from schools into their high-needs block, which is sometimes the right thing to do. Of course we also want to ensure that the facilities are always there to help local authorities manage their high-needs budget as effectively as they can.
We have increased opportunities in technical and professional education by doubling the level of cash for apprenticeships through the apprenticeship levy to £2.5 billion over the course of the decade. By 2020, funding available to support adult FE participation is planned to be higher than at any time in England’s history. At the other end of the age range, high-quality childcare supports children’s development and prepares them for school. That is why this Government are investing more than any previous Government in childcare and early years education—around £6 billion by 2020.

This Government have extended the scope and extent of support in multiple ways. As well as higher reimbursement under universal credit—higher than was ever available under tax credits—and tax-free childcare, we have increased the childcare available for three-year-olds and four-year-olds from 12.5 hours to 15 hours, and that funded early education now has a 95% take-up rate among parents of four-year-olds. There are also an additional 15 hours—so 30 hours in total—for working parents. All of that represents greater entitlement than under the Labour Government.

Then, of course, there was the landmark extension of the 15-hour entitlement to disadvantaged two-year-olds in 2013, which has since benefited almost 750,000 children at an investment of £2 billion since the policy began—something that was never made available to disadvantaged families by any Labour Government. Looking ahead, funding for the future comes up periodically at spending reviews. We have a spending review next year, and we are already looking at the approach for this period. Of course, we have a review of post-18 education and funding in progress, and £84 million was confirmed in the Budget for children’s social care to help spread best practice.

Turning to school-age education, I am not the first Education Secretary to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that we need a better balance between technical and academic education. While we plan to invest nearly £7 billion during the current academic year to ensure a place in education and training or an apprenticeship for every 16 to 19-year-old who wants one, I am conscious that investment, can be seen across the country, thanks to the hard work and dedication of our teachers and education professionals. It is a track record that gives all of us much to be proud of, but the job is not finished. That is why this Government are working hard to ensure that we come together to help schools get the best value, that expertise is available across the system and that resources that do not need to be purchased or created on an individual basis—from lesson plans to energy contracts—are shared. We will also work to bear down on the £60 million to £75 million that schools spend on recruitment with the new teacher vacancy service and the agency supply teacher deal. By creating financial benchmarking, we are helping schools to share good practice and identify ways to use resources more effectively. All of this allows schools to direct the maximum resource into what they do best—teaching.

Jim McMahon: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Damian Hinds: I am sorry, but I am short of time.

We all want to see standards rise across our schools and across the wider education system and, thanks to this Government’s reforms and the hard work of teachers, this is happening. I say we all want to see standards rise, but every step of the way the Labour party opposed the introduction of phonics checks. In Wales, where Labour runs the education system, PISA rankings for maths, science and reading are lower than those in England.

The Labour party wants to scrap academies and free schools, putting ideology before education and trusting politicians over teachers. In our exchange yesterday, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) said that Labour’s policy is “no threat to any new or existing school”—[Official Report, 12 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 16.] but she did not, and cannot, reconcile that with her explicit stated policy to stop the free schools programme, “bring all publicly funded schools back into the mainstream public sector” and impose the Orwellian-sounding “common rulebook” across the school system.

I have referred to a number of figures in the thousands, millions or billions, but what is clear is that each of those figures would be under threat from the Labour party, because we need a strong economy to invest in our public services. It is a balanced approach to the economy that will mean we can continue to provide our schools and our education system with the resources they need. Labour’s approach of more spending, more borrowing and more debt would take us back to square one and hit ordinary working people, just like last time.

This Government are unapologetic in our ambition for every child and young person in this country. Again, that ambition is backed by more revenue funding going into our schools than ever before—an investment that we are able to provide thanks to our balanced approach to the economy. The benefits of our reforms, backed by that investment, can be seen across the country, thanks to the hard work and dedication of our teachers and education professionals. It is a track record that gives all of us much to be proud of, but the job is not finished. We will always want to do more, and we will continue to do more so that every child, in every classroom and in every part of the country, has the chance to thrive, with none left behind.
Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Both Front Benchers have been very generous in taking interventions, but inevitably that has put some pressure on time. I will impose an immediate time limit of six minutes, but I warn colleagues that that may fail.

4.52 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Secretary of State’s first major test was to lead the education sector’s negotiations with the Treasury in the run-up to the Budget. On any basic evidence, he seems to have failed that test spectacularly. Not only did he fail to secure any meaningful increase in funding for our schools and sixth-form colleges, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s complacent language of “little extras” suggests that the Secretary of State was not even able to convince the Treasury of the scale of the funding needs of the school system in England, which is profoundly worrying when the comprehensive spending review negotiations are beginning.

I give credit to the Minister for School Standards and the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who has responsibility for sixth-form colleges, for being willing to receive deputations of Harrow headteachers, including the principal of St Dominic’s Sixth Form College. I am grateful to both Ministers for the way in which they listened to the concerns of professionals in my constituency.

I have been given information that underlines the concerns of those headteachers, but first I will set out the broader London perspective, which reflects some of the concerns raised in interventions by London colleagues about the financial crisis facing many of our capital’s schools. London Councils’ analysis of the provisional school funding allocations for 2019-20, which were announced in July and appear to follow a similar structure to the 2018-19 formula announcements, shows that London schools will receive a lower proportion of funding across 2018-19 and 2019-20 than those in any other region of the country. Some 70% of schools in London will receive the minimum—a 1% increase per pupil—between 2017-18 and 2019-20, compared with just 39% of schools across the rest of England. Fifteen boroughs in the capital will see more than 90% of their schools receive the floor of a 1% rise per pupil across these two years. In comparison to the 2018-19 allocations, 21 out of London’s 32 boroughs are in the lower half of schools’ block increases, and two of the four local authorities in the country that are expected to see a funding decrease are London boroughs, including, crucially, my own London Borough of Harrow.

Headteachers in the borough report to me that they face significant financial pressures: non-teaching pay awards; rises in non-teaching pension costs; the impact of the apprenticeships levy; and concerns about whether the funding for teaching pay awards and incremental pay rises for teachers will be provided from central Government. These all point to an average annual cost of one to two primary school teachers. For secondary schools, it is the equivalent of four secondary teachers per annum.

That assumes that, on average, school budgets are cash-flat. In Harrow, some 25% of schools—14 out of the 54—are currently protected by the minimum funding guarantee, which means in practice that they will lose 1.5% of their per-pupil budget per annum. That could equate to a cash reduction of a further £20,000 to £30,000 per annum. The Secretary of State and other Government Members might like to hide behind the idea that there have been record funding increases, but on the ground in Harrow, headteachers and governing bodies report substantial financial pressures. Similarly, local authorities report profound concerns about the rising demand for high-end special needs funding, and it would be good to hear—

Paul Farrelly: My hon. Friend may have seen a piece in The Observer at the weekend about the crisis across the country in special needs education. My county council has just announced a review, and we fear the worst—it is already removing special needs allowances for mainstream schools. Does he agree that it is time that the Government launched a review of how special needs are met across the country in order to inform a coherent policy and provision?

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The key thing is that extra money needs to be found immediately for special needs provision, particularly high-end provision. Like Harrow Council, many local authorities—partially in London, but clearly around the rest of the country—are profoundly worried about that. I suspect that the Secretary of State knows full well the scale of the pressures facing headteachers in this country. It would be good to hear from the Minister for School Standards in his winding-up speech what his Department will do about that in negotiations with the Treasury.

4.59 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Everyone will be aware that it is Parliament Week. Schools up and down the country, in west Cornwall and on Scilly are doing an incredible amount of work to raise awareness about what we do here, our amazing democratic system and politics throughout the country. I commend my local schools on their work to raise awareness about such vital issues.

I also commend the schools in my constituency, particularly St Mary’s Church of England School, on how they have engaged in the world war one commemorations. They have done amazing work. In Penzance, we could not get full access to the cenotaph, so instead the school children made a poppy for every person who lost their life in the first world war and named each poppy in remembrance of that individual. Thousands of people are aware of the commemoration and are visiting Penzance this week.

Every week, I make time to visit a local school, where I find great teachers, committed staff and happy and keen pupils. In fact, some 89% of primary schools
throughout Cornwall are good or outstanding, and 83% of secondary schools are good or outstanding. I recognise the pressures on funding and know that they are accepted in the Department for Education. As we look towards next year’s strategic spending review, it is imperative that we really understand how funding is distributed so that we can teach our children and give them the best start in life.

Since I was elected in 2015, I have met various Education Secretaries and Ministers on a number of occasions, and I have always found them to be helpful and that they listen. In fact, I was able to bring teachers all the way from my constituency in west Cornwall to meet a Minister so that they could talk through some of the challenges that they face. That opportunity was well received and appreciated. The Minister has visited my constituency several times, and he has listened, engaged, and even opened a new building.

The national funding formula is welcome in west Cornwall and throughout Cornwall, because we have traditionally had low funding for schools. It is right that the money is fairly distributed throughout the country for every child. We look forward to the formula being fully delivered so that our children receive a fair share of the money available for schools. Even today, a large amount—millions of pounds—is being spent on improving buildings throughout my constituency and building a new school.

I listened carefully to the shadow Secretary of State for Education, but I did not hear her set out any ideas about how we could improve the present situation as it is today, so I thought I could help. There are practical measures that the Government could take today to help schools. This is about understanding not only what money schools have, but how they can use their money better and how we can help them with it.

For example, a multi-academy trust in my constituency started 18 months ago and has 19 schools. It has to show in its end-of-year accounts the value of its buildings, even though it is not allowed to realise its assets—the trust is not allowed to do anything with the buildings, which do not belong to it. Were we to look at its accounts, we would think that it was extremely well off, but in fact the money available to spend is a much smaller amount. Will the Minister or the Secretary of State look into how schools’ accounts are presented so that they will truly represent the money available to schools and no one will be confused about the pressures they are under?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is being helpful with his ideas, so perhaps I might pitch one. When I meet firms in my constituency, they tell me that they are terribly worried about skills shortages. Schools have an even more critical role to play in helping local firms and liaising with them to see what they can do to encourage children’s ambitions to work in those local companies.

Derek Thomas: I shall address that issue when I talk about the apprenticeship levy, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are real pressures on skills in my rural area, so it is imperative that we work with schools to help teachers to understand the jobs and skills that are available and how we can keep people in the area, because it is extremely important in rural areas that we do not have what we describe as brain drain.

I am looking forward to the strategic spending review, because there is no doubt in my mind that more money is needed. However, as I said, there are things that can help schools today. For example, the apprenticeship levy has been mentioned. My local schools are contributing to it, but find it difficult to access apprenticeships, because although they have apprentices, when they go to college the schools have to cover the work that the apprentices do, and therefore have to spend even more money on supporting people. My local schools’ request to me was that their contribution to the levy be scrapped, which would help their budget.

Another idea is about cash flow. It is really important that the Government understand—I know that they do—that if a child starts school in September, they are registered for funding in October and the funding arrives the following April, but if a child turns up at school after October, the funding for that child comes 18 months later. There are schools in my constituency that have very few children leaving. For example, about six children left one school in July, but 31 joined its reception in September. No money will be given to that school for those 31 children until April next year. It is very difficult for a school that is building up, that is becoming popular and that is a school of choice for parents when the money just does not follow the child. I say to the Government that, rather than putting more money into the system, they could make things much fairer for schools if the money could follow the child, rather than be allocated in the April after the intake.

Another area that is proving to be a problem, which is not unrelated to what I have just said, is support for special educational needs. One school in my constituency supported children with special educational needs to such a great extent that nine children joined it after the October date, which meant that £56,000 had to be found to support those children for 18 months.

My time is running out, but I just want to say that I am so in awe of all the teachers and teaching staff in my constituency. They do a fantastic amount of work, but they face challenges, such as finding money to provide sports facilities such as all-weather pitches. I also wish to make a quick plea. If we remember all that we have just said about post-16 pupils—about making sure that we have the skills that we need and that we do not lose children out of the county—we should probably look at plus-16 funding and make sure that our young people can get the skills they need in their own area.

5.6 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Investing in our schools and improving education standards should be a priority for any Government. Our schools play a vital role in ensuring that young people are prepared for the world of work, positively contributing to our society and economy. However, the inadequate provision in the recent Budget, not to mention eight years of damaging cuts to our schools, demonstrates that education is not a high enough priority for this Government.

The Chancellor’s promise of £400 million for a few “little extras” when schools are on their knees owing to years of crippling cuts has, understandably, angered teachers and parents around the country. That is the equivalent of the Chancellor chucking a few crumbs to our hard-working teachers who are struggling to cope—
so much for the end of austerity. It is as if this Government think that if they keep telling us that austerity is over, they will be believed regardless of the facts. As we have heard, the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that headteachers should be preparing for more difficult years ahead—that is despite the fact that cuts that have already been made. For example, the Government have cut £3.5 billion from the education capital budget since 2010, and £1.7 billion in real terms from schools budgets since 2013. There has been a reduction in spending of 8% per pupil in real terms between 2010 and 2017-18, as well as a 21% reduction in funding per sixth-form student since 2010, not to mention the 8% cut in per student funding in further education and sixth-form colleges. Teachers’ pay is down by £4,000 in real terms since 2010, and the funds for special educational needs and disability are also inadequate.

Insufficient funding means that schools cannot pay their teachers properly. It means rising class sizes, with more than half a million children in supersize classes, fewer special support staff, the end of school trips for many children and much else. The Education Policy Institute found that the proportion of local authority secondary schools in deficit has trebled to more than a quarter of all such schools.

A good education will increase opportunity and lift children out of poverty. In my constituency, schools have been transformed thanks to the investment that began under the previous Labour Government. When the Education Secretary starts lecturing us he should remember how appalling the education system was when Labour came into power. If he wants to give us a history lesson, he should go back to the history of his Government and the way that they treated inner-city areas around the country—it was with contempt. It was the investment of funding in teachers, leadership, management and supporting parents that transformed education across London and other parts of the country. This Government are in a race to the bottom. They are not trying to lift kids out of poverty or to improve education. The Secretary of State should learn lessons from what happened in London and not try to decimate schools in our city. Other areas could learn from the London challenge and much else that was a success. This would be better than turning schools and regions against each other, which is not right and will not serve our children well.

Despite record levels of child poverty—the highest in the country—the children in my area have advanced and have had opportunities because of investment in our education system, and that must not be put at risk. But this Government, with their vicious cuts and failure to invest in the future, are putting all that at risk. Our schools are facing cuts amounting to £16 million between 2015 and 2020 alone. As I said earlier, that is an average of £448 per pupil—in the borough with the highest child poverty rate in the country.

The Government are hellbent on decimating our public services, including schools, Sure Start centres, early years education and the police service; the list goes on. When they face a public backlash or political opposition, they grudgingly cave in, having done the damage, with a few crumbs here and a few there. Education is no exception. I call on the Secretary of State to step up and fight for more resources ahead of the next spending review to ensure that our schools get the investment they deserve and need so that the next generation are not held back by the failures of this Government. I appeal to him to step up and make sure that the Chancellor does not just give our kids and schools a few crumbs, but that he puts in serious funding to ensure that the children of our country can survive, thrive and contribute to the economy.

5.12 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali). There is a sense of déjà vu in these debates about public services. We have rehearsed these arguments over many years, but I still find it extraordinary that when we try to bring a degree of order and sanity to public finances, the Labour party—which wrecked the economy and completely destroyed the public finances—makes the specious argument that we have somehow wrecked public services. In fact, we have preserved the ability of this country to meet the level of public service requirement that our constituents and the country expect, by having a sound footing on the economy. It is ridiculous that the Labour party should constantly harp on about devastating cuts when we had to save the economy.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is making a typically robust speech. This debate is about the next generation. Surely the moral point is that it is precisely the people in education today—in our schools and colleges—who will have to repay the national debt that will be accumulated if we are not prudent and careful with public expenditure. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am delighted that my hon. Friend is talking about public finance, because we also have to talk about education and look at the record of the previous Labour Administration. In the course of effectively destroying the public finances and leaving us with the biggest deficit in our peacetime history, Labour presided over an absolute fall in standards in our schools. This has been well documented by the programme for international student assessment tables and other international records. It was the case—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Not too much shouting from a sedentary position, please.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Labour Members are shouting because they do not like to hear the truth—it is embarrassing to them.

We looked at reading statistics and we looked at mathematics. The coalition Government that came in in 2010 not only managed to begin to reduce the deficit but drove up standards through the admirable work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). When he was Secretary of State for four years, he managed to begin to drive up standards in schools. He reorganised a lot of the qualifications. On that note, I am delighted about the introduction of the new T-levels, showing innovation and a new approach. We introduced free schools, which have been very successful.

Mike Kane: How many have?

Kwasi Kwarteng: There have been more than 400, and each of them has been—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman scoffs, but each of them has been extremely successful and is driving up standards in its locality.
I was particularly surprised to hear that the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), is actually campaigning to try to preserve the free school in his borough because it is a beacon of excellence. This is the kind of hypocrisy—"Do as I say, not as I do"—that we have learned to expect from Labour. It is an absolute scandal that someone like the right hon. Gentleman should be against free schools but actually support one in his own constituency. That school is an excellent initiative. He is being a very good constituency MP, and I am delighted to see that he is supporting a free school in his constituency.

The facts of the matter are very clear. What the coalition Government and the current Conservative Government have managed to do is to bring some degree of order to the public finances while driving standards higher in education. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has suggested that we have 1.9 million more pupils in outstanding schools. [ Interruption. ] These are facts. I know that Labour Members do not want to hear those facts. We have also heard—[ Interruption. ] I am surprised that I am eliciting a running commentary from the shadow Secretary of State. It is absolutely extraordinary. She does not like hearing the truth, does she? [ Interruption. ] She really does not like it, so she will not let me continue my speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Really, can we just take the temperature down a little bit here?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have never, in my eight years in Parliament, actually had a running commentary on any speech, so clearly I must have hit a nerve. It is absolutely extraordinary, this constant chuntering.

The facts are very clear. We have had higher standards in the past eight years— [ Interruption. ] I do not think that is particularly funny, if we look at the wreckage of the last Labour Government. We have a comprehensive spending review next year when we will be allocating even more resources to education and to schools than ever before. We have more teachers. We have higher attainment. We have higher standards than ever before. In the context of the disaster that Labour presided over in respect of the public finances, what this Government have done over the past eight years is to be commended.

In my constituency there are six schools in the maintained sector—very good secondary schools. Every single one of them has seen standards improve and has seen additional amounts of money. We have seen, with one exception, additional amounts of money put to pupils' use for books, attainment and driving up standards. I would just say that we in Spelthorne would like to see some degree of equalisation between the London allowances that London teachers have and the amount that teachers in our borough receive. We are just outside London. Many of our teachers feel that because they do not have London weighting, even though the costs in the borough are level with those in London, we would like some sort of adjustment, if that were possible. Overall, though, while the picture is not perfect—very little is perfect—we are on a much, much better footing than was ever the case, certainly when I started in my role in 2010.

5.19 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I speak as a former teacher, as someone who has served for 20 years as a school governor, as a parent and, most recently, as a grandparent. I also speak as someone who was a child from a deprived home. I can tell the Secretary of State that I really understand the difference that education makes to life chances, and I understand that education is the key to social mobility, so I was delighted when the Prime Minister said:

"I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it's your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like."

When the Secretary of State said that social mobility is a "large part" of the reason we have a Department for Education, I thought we had cracked it, but sadly I was wrong, because the reality does not match the rhetoric.

In my constituency, the average reduction in school funding is £300 per child, and Burnley FE college has had its funding cut by 30% since 2010. Those budget cuts have had serious implications for the educational opportunities of children and young people in my constituency. There are serious concerns, but in the limited time available to me, I want to focus on the provision of early years education.

I want to go right back to the beginning, to the crucial early years. It seems, at least on paper, that the Secretary of State agrees with me on that too. He has said that "the point of greatest leverage for social mobility is the very earliest time in life."

I absolutely agree, but too many of our children hail from homes where poverty and deprivation limit experience and stifle early learning, and by the time they arrive at school, they are already behind.

Two weeks ago I chatted with an early years teacher, who told me about a home visit she had made to a three-year-old boy who lives with his mum, dad and sister. The family have one room to live and sleep in, and they share a kitchen and bathroom with three other families. The main room is damp, and mould is growing on the walls. Not surprisingly, there is hardly any room to move around the double bed and no room for a child to run or play. Mum works days, so dad looks after the little boy during the day. Sadly he does not engage with the little boy as much as he would like because he works nights, and he has to sleep sometime. Because no one has much time and doing the laundry is difficult with a shared kitchen arrangement, the little boy is still in nappies. The teacher told me that that case is not unusual. I hope the Secretary of State will take the time to outline how that little boy and others like him fit into his plans for social mobility.

Given that sad reality, is it any wonder that so many children in this country start primary school with language and social skills that are below the expected level for their age group, and that more than a quarter of children finish their reception year still without the early communication and reading skills that they need to thrive? Those children cannot wait until primary school for those issues to be addressed.

Independent research has shown that maintained nursery schools provide the highest-quality early years education, meeting higher standards than others. They provide a different service from other early years providers.
They close the achievement gap for so many of the most disadvantaged children in the country, provide expert support for children with special needs, provide family support for some of our most vulnerable children and families, and act as system leaders, supporting other early years providers in their locality to raise standards. Of course, the Secretary of State is aware of the excellent provision in maintained nursery schools, not least because of the valiant efforts of hundreds of nursery school teachers who have made the journey from every corner of this country to make their case in this place.

Even though extensive research shows that every single pound spent in the vital early years is worth £15 spent in later years, it is a sad fact that 325,000 children have no access to a nursery school teacher. That number is set to rise significantly unless the Government puts nursery schools on a sustainable financial footing, recognising that they are schools and need to be funded as such. If the Secretary of State is serious about driving social mobility and raising educational standards, I ask him to recognise the phenomenal contribution that this sector makes to the life chances of so many children, and I ask that he goes beyond warm words and today makes a firm commitment to fund it for the future and announce the delay without delay.

5.23 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper). The point she made about children going into schools without the requisite level of reading was interesting. The feedback I have had from my schools is quite worrying. There are issues of deprivation and so on, but there are also parents who do not read to their children enough; that is a simple point.

Julie Cooper: In the case of the family that I cited, when does the hon. Gentleman think the parents were actually able to read to their child, given that one was in work during the child’s waking hours and the parent who had worked nights was asleep during the day or most of it? I assure him that it would have been very difficult.

James Cartlidge: I was referring to what I have heard in my constituency. That was obviously not specific to the hon. Lady’s case, about which I cannot possibly comment. I am simply saying, given the feedback I have had, that although there are issues of deprivation, there are also parents who are not taking seriously enough their responsibility to read to their children, which is leaving them with lower standards. We have to say that, because it has truth in it, I am afraid.

I do agree with the hon. Lady about social mobility. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is absolutely right about the importance of education spending. It is the one form of public expenditure that can ultimately enable people to better themselves, rise up in life, and go on and make the most of their natural talents. Obviously we all support school funding, and we want to see our schools adequately funded.

It is shocking when we hear a speech from an Opposition Front Bencher that does not mention the way in which the cake is divided. There are schools in counties across England facing this problem and many different political representations have been made, but overwhelmingly the shire counties receive a very poor share of the cake. We can increase the whole thing, but if we want to see more spending in Suffolk, we have to change the formula. That is why I am incredibly grateful to the Government for going through the pain and the difficult calculations to come to a formula, which, when it comes in, will see my schools in South Suffolk receive an average of 5.1% more funding. That is generous, and it will enable us to give more support to the children we have been talking about.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will my hon. Friend enlighten the House about the fact that all these plans would make no sense if the economy was wrecked once again, as the Labour party is too often wont to do?

Mike Kane: One hit wonder!

James Cartlidge: It may be a one hit wonder, but it is sung very well by my hon. Friend. As I always say, we also have a strong employment record. When children come out of school, college or university, they have to get jobs. We want them to thrive, and that means having a strong economy to drive such funding.

The higher spending I have mentioned, which we look forward to receiving in Suffolk when we have changed the formula, is not there for the sake of it. There is a tendency in this debate to talk about spending as an end in itself, but what matters is the outcomes that the funding delivers. I have to say, when we have the statistic that there are 1.9 million more children in schools ranked good or outstanding since 2010, we should be proud of that. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) says it is because of the higher school population, but the school population has not gone up by 1.9 million in that time. It is because—surprise, surprise—more schools are rated good or outstanding.

Let us take the example of Suffolk. In December 2013, 72% of schools in Suffolk were rated good or outstanding; this March, it was almost 90%. We are also seeing real improvement in progress 8 and attainment 8, and all those things show that we are adding value, meaning that our pupils are getting about and making more of themselves.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that driving up standards is linked, importantly, to the increase in choice? It was choice that my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) introduced in his groundbreaking reform of bringing forward free schools in 2010, and it is the freedom for parents to choose that drives up excellence.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and my experience backs that up. A village can have its own school, but if parents think the school a drive away is better, they will send their children there, because they are exercising choice. Such a choice undoubtedly drives up standards, so my hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

In the last few minutes of my speech, I want to join my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) in suggesting some ideas and adding them into the mix,
as one likes to do. The first is about teachers’ pay. It is a great achievement when headteachers in particular show the leadership that enables schools that are in special measures or struggling to improve. In my view, when that happens there should be a financial reward. By the way, that would be paid for, because if more schools become good or outstanding because teachers turn them around, especially from special measures, that will lead to higher productivity, which, after all, is how we pay for higher spending. When teachers put in that sort of effort there should be a financial reward, because the country will benefit and it will pay off.

Another idea concerns school transport. In Suffolk at the moment—no beating about the bush—we are going through very controversial and painful changes to school transport, necessitated by the difficult situation of council funding. I simply remind Opposition Members, before they inevitably start making noises, that they did not protect council budgets in their 2010 manifesto any more than we did, so the situation would have been very similar. Councils have had to make painful decisions. In Suffolk that means that school transport is being reduced. The system is being changed, and I hope that the impact will not be too dramatic.

I find it very difficult to defend this, but I understand why we have decided not to look at pensioner benefits in this Parliament—because of the political situation and the parliamentary arithmetic. However, I have wealthy pensioners in my constituency who get a free bus pass, and we are cutting school transport. I struggle to justify that. To me, that is a good example of the intergenerational problems that are building up in this country, which we have to address. Many constituents of mine who are relatively wealthy pensioners come to me and say it is silly that they get that. That is just a suggestion, and it is silly that they get that. That is just a suggestion, and it is funded. I think it would be a brave and good thing to do, because there needs to be more support for those at key stages of life to get school transport and to get to college.

In conclusion, we should be proud of the progress our schools are making. We are seeing genuine improvement, and the best way of measuring that, as other hon. Members have said, is through international comparisons. We are going up the league tables for reading. Our results are far better, and that is because of the leadership shown by a Conservative Government, responsible finances and better standards. That is the right mix for schools policy.

5.31 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). He may not know this, but I grew up in Suffolk and went to school there, so I know exactly the impact that the last Labour Government had on the communities he talks about. Under the last Labour Government, the school that I went to had a complete revamp of its maths block. That all happened under the last Labour Government, who invested in the capital elements of schools. The idea that capital is a new device that this Government have found and that they are the only ones who are spending it is nonsense. I am of a generation that a Labour Government created through schools investment, education investment and capital investment.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a terrible pity that the sixth form has experienced the worst cuts of any age group?

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend makes a prescient comment, because I will come on to that exact point momentarily.

Schools in Stoke-on-Trent are suffering the same problems as those suffered by schools across the country. Their per pupil funding has not been protected, so the costs they have to endure and incur are so significant that their budgets no longer balance. Only on Monday I was at Etruscan Primary School in my constituency where the executive headteacher told me that her school budget’s projected deficit for 2020 was almost £500,000. Through diligent work, she has managed to bring that down to £300,000, but there is still a huge gap between what she will have to spend and the money coming in. She is not the only one. The headteacher of St Thomas Aquinas Catholic Primary School has also written to me to explain that she faced a budget deficit of £100,000 over the past year. Moreover, she does not get sufficient resource from Stoke-on-Trent City Council, which is controlled by the Conservatives and independents, to meet the costs of supporting statemented children in her school who require—and who rightly receive—one-to-one tuition and support. She has to supplement that budget from her general school fund, which was also attacked and top-sliced this year by the Conservative and independent council as it sought to meet its higher needs budget. That budget has been overspent because the council has not got its own house in order with in-house provision and is instead sending children from my constituency and the city of Stoke-on-Trent out of area for the provision of particular educational needs. That is not good for the children, it is not good for school budgets, and it is certainly not good for the economy of Stoke-on-Trent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) has rightly pointed out the scandal that is the funding for further education and sixth-form colleges in particular. Only last week I was talking to the vice-principal of my city’s sixth-form college who said that the cap of £4,000 per learner means that they have to scale back on the extras—not the “little extras” the Chancellor talked about but: the support they put in place for trips; the support they put in place to allow learners who need additional support, but who do not have a statement; the support they put in place to allow learners who need additional support, but who do not have a statement; the support they put in place to allow learners who need additional support, but who do not have a statement; the support they put in place to allow learners who need additional support, but who do not have a statement; the support they put in place to allow learners who need additional support, but who do not have a statement; but who do not have a statement. They are having to scale back on every single one of those because their costs are going up. Rises in inflation mean that any reserves they had are being eaten into. As a result, the young people in the college are suffering.

The Chancellor announced in his Budget a tax cut for the wealthiest 10%. Everybody in the Chamber will receive a tax cut as a result of the Budget the Chancellor proposed and is being voted through. I was proud to vote against that, because I do not think it is fair or right. I do not know how I can go into a classroom and justify billions of pounds being spent on tax cuts for the wealthiest 10% when headteachers across my constituency are telling me that they cannot afford to buy textbooks and other provisions for their schools.
**Huw Merriman:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Gareth Snell:** No, because that would take up time and I am sure there are plenty of others who wish to speak.

I cannot go into those schools and justify a tax cut for the wealthiest 10%, while at the same time my schools are going short of provisions. The £10,000 the Chancellor announced for little extras will not go towards closing their budget deficits or towards the provisions they need. It is a disgraceful attack on those schools and their resources.

The Education Secretary looks puzzled by that, but that is the policy of the Government he supports. When I speak to headteachers in my constituency I make it very clear that if they want to see real education funding reform they will not get it from this Government. The Government are simply trying to rig the system to support schools in their constituencies, while cities like mine suffer further. [Interruption.] The Education Secretary asks me what I suggest. What I am suggesting is what I have just said. The funding formula is being re-engineered to move provisions away from areas of deprivation, in cities such as Stoke-on-Trent, towards areas with lower levels of deprivation to placate the electorate in those areas. The hon. Member for South Suffolk said that he knows policies change depending on which electorate they need to placate. That is happening with school budgets. That is why Stoke-on-Trent schools will lose money, while schools in other parts of the country will gain money despite the fact that Stoke-on-Trent ranks 14th for deprivation. [Interruption.] The Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), is shaking his head. He is an MP for the city I represent—

**Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** indicated dissent.

**Gareth Snell:** It is true: he is an MP for the city I represent. [Laughter.] He will have sat in the same meetings as me, with the Stoke-on-Trent Association of School, College and Academy Leaders and the Stoke Heads and Principals Executive, while headteachers talked about the funding deficits they face. All I would say to the Government and the Secretary of State is this: please take up the baton for schools. Take up the requests from colleges and get more money out of the Treasury. At the moment, he is asleep on the job. The sooner he realises that he needs to stand up for schools the better.

5.38 pm

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** It is a delight to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I hope he will encourage his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), to put these views on increasing schools funding in his own literature. Perhaps the Government will alter the funding formula to make it fairer for that constituency.

It is a pleasure to be called in this debate and to reflect on the good news and the good work happening in Torbay to improve school standards and invest in our schools. I am particularly proud of the money that Paignton Community and Sports Academy will be getting to sort out some of its school buildings, some of which have been in a poor condition for some time. I want to pay tribute on the Floor of the House to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) who, when she was Education Secretary, met me and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) to discuss the school’s buildings. The school had been knocked back from a couple of bids, but my right hon. Friend was very good and she listened. She took the school’s points on board and now about £4 million will be spent to sort out its buildings and provide the top quality education its pupils need.

In many cases, such debates about Torbay can focus on our grammar schools. I am always very clear that grammar schools should be a choice for those parents who believe it is right for them and their children, but that no one should feel compelled at 11 to take an 11-plus test to get a good education. That is why the improvement of other schools in Torbay has always been so welcome. I look particularly at Torquay Academy, which is now one of the schools with the highest value-added scores in the south-west. Its academy partner is Torquay Boys’ Grammar School and they work very closely together. The academy is excellent in attainment and those of all abilities and a priority in exactly the same way, despite the fact that there are deprived schools down the round. They do not conflict with each other; they complement each other and work very well together.

In terms of aspiration, we are looking ahead to the new £17 million high-tech skills centre that is under construction in Paignton; it will be part of South Devon College. The Paignton Community and Sports Academy sixth form will be provided by the college, taking advantage of many of the fantastic facilities. For me, it is about driving aspiration and giving people opportunities, not just the idea that if someone goes to university, it will be the greatest part of their life—although it is good to see that more people from deprived backgrounds are going to university. Technical skills are as important for driving aspiration and ambition, which is why that investment is so welcome.

Ellacombe Church of England Academy is in one of the most deprived parts of my constituency. After the previous speech, people might think that Torbay is purely palm trees, beaches and retired people, but we have areas with particular challenges, and that does not change just because they happen to be in Torbay rather than another part of the country. The new nursery provision will support a school that has come on in leaps and bounds over the past eight to nine years, partly through the academy process, partly through working with other schools nearby, and partly through the work of the superb team of teachers there.

One concern that some schools would want me to raise while I am on the Floor of the House is Torbay Council’s current consultation on its high-needs formula and how the top-slicing might work. I see that the Minister for School Standards is sitting on the Treasury Bench; he will remember meeting the heads of three of my schools to discuss how they have been at the very lowest points of funding and that the top-slicing proposal could push them below the minimum that they have been guaranteed. It would be interesting to hear some thoughts from him either now or in a later meeting on how some of those challenges can be avoided.

There is a lot to be proud of in our schools, not just across the country, but particularly in my constituency. There will be challenges, but to pretend that the challenges
are just recent ignores the past. One of my primary schools is a great place to go, but it was saved only due to the election of a Conservative Mayor, because the then Liberal Democrat council, under a Labour Government, wanted to close it as part of a surplus places scheme. That would have been such a short-sighted decision, given that it is now in an area where there is the most demand on school places. Thankfully, Nick Bye, the then Mayor of Torbay, took the decision to keep the school open and looked ahead to a future when numbers would be increasing, so we have not been left in a situation where our area that has the most pressure has even more. I am also pleased to say that a private, independent school that recently closed—it had falling numbers for some years, partly due to the quality of local state schools—has now been acquired to become a new state primary school slap-bang in the middle of Paignton. That would be a positive investment in one of our most deprived communities in Torbay.

It has been interesting to hear this debate. I must say that when it comes to education, point scoring is better on a school sports day than in a political debate. Certainly some of the stuff we have heard is not what people would particularly want in a classroom, and perhaps one or two Opposition Members could do with doing their homework on one or two issues.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: No, I will let other people speak. To be honest, the hon. Lady has not been here for much of the debate—[Interruption.] Someone shouting when they have not been here is really not very professional. It has been welcome to have this debate and talk about the schools and what we are doing in Torbay, and to reflect on a few of the issues for my constituents.

5.44 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

I want specifically to speak about special educational needs funding. A growing number of parents come to my constituency surgeries in real distress because their children just do not get the support that they need in class. Although parents generally have a good experience of support in primary schools, I am afraid that they really struggle when their children transition to secondary education. They find that support just is not there at secondary schools, and that those schools cannot cope with their children’s extra needs. More and more children suffer with anxiety, depression and other mental health challenges, and there simply is not enough support to help them with those things at such a crucial stage of their life.

I have been contacted by several parents whose children simply do not attend school—they have dropped out—because of their anxiety and because support for their special needs just is not in place. Their parents are fined as a consequence. I believe that has also led to a number of informal expulsions of vulnerable children and to the growing use of home schooling, which I am concerned is used to hide the number of children who drop out because they do not get support for their special educational needs in school. Children are being written off and abandoned, and that concerns me greatly.

I do not for one moment blame schools and teachers. I know they work flat out as they suffer real-term budget cuts. In fact, challenges with special educational needs are often the biggest issue that teachers themselves raise with me. They work with our children and see those challenges day in, day out. However, we know that councils do not have the financial capacity to provide the specialist mental health support that children need.

Across the country, council overspending on children’s special educational needs and disabilities trebled in just three years, from £61 million in 2015-16 to £195 million in 2017-18, yet, as the Secretary of State probably saw, research in The Observer this weekend identified 40 councils that have either cut special needs funding or are considering doing so next year. I am afraid his warm words are meaningless unless councils are given the funding they need by his colleagues.

We know that support staff are the key to supporting pupils with higher needs. They are always the first to be hit when funding pressures bite. Since 2013, there has been a 10% cut in the number of teaching assistants in secondary schools, despite the number of pupils having risen. Teaching assistants provide more than just educational support. They play a fundamental role in supporting learners with a whole range of emotional and behavioural needs, helping to address difficulties such as lack of self-esteem and confidence, and other hidden mental health challenges. However, when their numbers are cut, their work in this area has to be picked up by teaching staff, who already have to deal with bigger classes.

Between 2015 and 2020, schools in my constituency will have lost more than £4 million in real terms. That is a massive per-pupil loss of £226. Given those funding pressures, it is no surprise that disadvantaged and SEND pupils struggle to receive the support they need in schools. I was shocked by reports in the media that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury was cut out of Budget discussions for having the temerity to ask for an extra £155 million for SEN places for some of our most vulnerable children. That is a damning indictment of the Government’s priorities when making Budget decisions. If the education of all our young people—particularly the most vulnerable—is not at the top of the Government’s priority list, they need to take a long, hard look at their position.

We have only one chance to give our children the best start in life. Support should be available to meet the individual needs of everyone. I urge the Government to take a look at education funding, particularly for children who face the most challenges—please do a fundamental review and commit to investing in the next generation.

5.48 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I do my best to ensure that I always contribute to debates on school funding and the success of our schools and education sector.

I make this contribution off the back of spending a week—the same week as my party conference in Birmingham—visiting 20 of the schools in my constituency and giving presentations about what goes on in this place, the role of an MP, democracy and how it has evolved over the years, and some of the campaigns I am focused on, including on school funding. The pupils I met were so full of life. They are like sponges—they
want to soak up everything they are taught. They are taught by outstanding teachers who work incredibly hard. The heads and senior leaders of those schools undoubtedly face a lot of pressures, yet still manage to motivate their pupils to be the best they can. I salute not just those 20 schools in my constituency, but all the schools in the country that do exactly the same. I will always have their back by ensuring that we give them the best we possibly can.

Having heard from the Opposition, let me say that we must give credit where credit is due as far as the past eight years are concerned. The fact that 1.9 million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools is testimony to not just the work that the Government are doing, but the schools themselves. It is the schools that have turned themselves around. I am very proud that all my local secondary schools are at that level, and doing incredibly well. Moreover, a record number of pupils are going to university and doing the best that they can.

The statistics are there. UK Government expenditure is 3.8% of GDP. In France the figure is 3.4%, in the United States it is 3.2%, and in Germany it is 2.6%. While there is more to be done, I think that the Opposition would have more credibility if they recognised those statistics and thought about how they could be built on, rather than trying to take them apart.

Funding has risen by record levels—it has increased from £41 billion, and soon it will be £43 billion. I have lobbied strongly for fair funding in my constituency. We were able to receive an extra 5% for our schools, and I am very grateful for that. However, we are still seeing unfairness in the system. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jack Brereton), who has actually given the headteachers that pay rise—the average headteacher pay is £68,000—strikes me as somewhat perverse. However, I would like the Government to look at pay, particularly at the senior levels.

Pre-school funding is also of great concern to me. I have lost a further two pre-schools in my constituency. Business rates are an issue, as are the national living wage and the fact that the hourly rate is not high enough to meet their costs. I recognise the £6 billion that the Government have provided for pre-schools, but I think they need to go that bit further and fund fully. That would be a successful policy.

Again, I salute my schools, their heads, and, indeed, the ministerial team, who have made my local schools good and outstanding.

5.54 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Although there are often disagreements in this Chamber, I am sure that one thing we can all agree on is that every child deserves the best opportunities in life. I am sure that we can also all agree that this begins with a quality education, not just an education. That is something that any Government should be proud to support, yet this Government’s record on education is one of cuts, funding pressures and recruitment crises.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, per-pupil spending in England’s schools has fallen by 8% since 2010, and the cuts are having a very real impact on the quality of education across the country, especially in Warrington, where children and young people have suffered for many years thanks to a legacy of low funding for schools.

Earlier this year, I conducted a survey of schools across my constituency of Warrington South. I did so to better understand the impact of underfunding on pupils and frontline staff, and the response was utterly damning. Some 100% of the 31 schools that responded were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their current funding situation, while 81% said that since 2015 they had had to make staffing cuts due to funding pressures. Some 80% had cut spending on books and equipment. Perhaps of even more concern, many schools reported plans to make further cuts in the next two years to cope with forthcoming budget pressures, with a staggering 91% saying they would need to cut spending on books and equipment, too. I would like to take this opportunity to praise the schools in my constituency, which work tirelessly and do all they possibly can to protect pupils from the cuts, but make no mistake—this is getting harder and harder.
In Warrington South and across the country, underfunding means that our schools are under unprecedented pressure, which is resulting in the loss of school staff and leading to cuts to vital classroom resources and support. Our school leaders are doing an excellent job in the most difficult circumstances, but across the country, our teachers, pupils, parents and campaigners have been crying out for the funding that is so desperately needed.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that schools are suffering in England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland? Will he join me in praising the 40,000 teachers who marched through Glasgow last month to stand up for our kids’ education—and that is just the start of it?

Faisal Rashid: I totally agree.

I passionately believe that in life you get what you pay for, and without adequate investment, we simply will not have a fit-for-purpose education system that provides young people with a quality education, and staff with the resources they need to provide that quality education.

In Warrington South and across the country underfunding means that our schools face unprecedented pressure. My survey and many similar ones carried out by my hon. Friends—if I remember correctly, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith) did an excellent survey in his constituency—all tell us loudly and clearly that underfunding is having a real impact on the quality of education that our young people are receiving.

This morning, while I was going through my social media, I came across a video of Alex, who was right here in this Chamber last week as part of the Youth Parliament. He made an excellent and passionate speech. We are taking funding away from such children, but they are the next generation. We are talking about Brexit, and about finding new markets, free trade agreements, manufacturing in that kind of event, and we must provide quality education to take us forward. If we do not provide those skills and that quality education, we will not have any future. These young people are our future and if this Government are serious about the future of this country being bright, it is high time that they started seriously funding our schools.

5.59 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) and to hear his typically determined championing of his constituency. One of the greatest pleasures of being the Member of Parliament representing Bolton West and Atherton is the school visits, particularly in connection to the events surrounding Parliament Week. I visited Devonshire Road Primary School yesterday and participated in a Q&A session there, and I digitally visited Ladybridge High School last week for a digital surgery that it was holding. That was the first time I had participated in that kind of event, and it was really interesting to see young people engaging in democracy in a way that my classmates and I never did when we were at school.

I also visited Bolton sixth-form college recently to hear its concerns. I understand that the Secretary of State went to a sixth-form college himself, following his studies at St Ambrose College. It is particularly important to represent the needs of those colleges, because that sector of our education system is often overlooked. Let us also remember the contributions that many of our schools made during Armistice Week, including activities by choirs and readings during the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the armistice and the end of the first world war.

It is important that we get the distribution right between the different boroughs around the country. We have heard today about the unfairness of the historical inequalities in funding, and I think everyone would recognise the importance of balancing out those problems. It would be remiss of me not to reflect the concerns that I consistently hear from headmasters and headmistresses across my constituency as they call for more funding. Bolton West needs more schools and more school capacity. Blackrod Primary School and Chorley New Road Primary School have recently been extended to meet increasing demand, but there is a need for new schools as well. We are seeing a substantial amount of house building on and around the constituency, and a demographic bulge has had an impact on primary schools and is now beginning to challenge the capacity of the secondary schools in the constituency to take more children.

There is constant concern about the lack of sufficient school building and of sufficient investment in schools, which ought, to some extent, to be driven by the council’s vision. However, we are consistently not getting the schools, the medical facilities, the GP surgeries or the roads that we need. That is a really consistent message across the constituency, and it is perfectly highlighted by Bolton Council’s lack of vision for the Horwich Loco Works. That is the biggest housing development in Greater Manchester, with 1,700 houses planned, yet not a single primary school is planned for the site. That is extraordinary. These will be family homes, probably with several children in each of them.

Bolton Council had a master plan and a vision for the Horwich Loco Works, but it has been ditched. The council’s plan is now for the schools around Horwich to double in size. Rather than being single intake, many of the primary schools will double in size. In some ways, that is good. We have good and outstanding primary schools that can increase in size and take more children, but let us look at the challenge that those families will face. For example, we want children to be able to walk to school, but if a primary school doubles in size, many of the children who go there will not be able to do that. Their parents will have to ferry them there in a car. We are looking at an area that is already suffering significant levels of congestion, and the lack of vision from the Labour-led Bolton Council will compound the significant problems that the town already faces. The council should be working with the developers to ensure that we have the leisure facilities, the roads, the medical facilities and the schools that we need.

This is part of a wider problem across Greater Manchester. A powerful vision should have been set by the 10 boroughs for the Greater Manchester spatial framework, which is supposed to combine house building with all the other infrastructure that is required. Consistently, however, the 10 borough councils, all of which are now led by Labour, have failed to set and deliver their vision for roads, medical facilities, leisure facilities and schools. The vision must be developed, and if Greater Manchester cannot sort it out and if the Mayor cannot help to deliver
6.5 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), although I do not share his view that local government should be blamed for school cuts. It is an even greater pleasure to speak in today’s debate, and I want to give a special mention to the group of female students from Leigh who will be visiting Parliament as part of the RECLAIM project in conjunction with Parliament Week. I am sure that the whole House will welcome them tomorrow. I also pay tribute to all the schools in my constituency. I have had the good fortune to work with them for several years—both in my previous role as a councillor and as an MP—but I have seen the real struggle that they have faced under this Government.

This debate comes just a fortnight after the Budget, which made it clear that austerity is not over for our schools, our teachers and our schoolchildren. Local parents and teachers in Leigh have seen reckless cuts coming from Westminster that will see the per pupil budget fall by £180 for every primary schoolchild and £253 for every secondary school pupil. That is hundreds of pounds per pupil taken away each and every year, with cuts of £3.9 million for primary schools and £4.3 million for secondary schools.

As has been pointed out already, the impact of the situation on our teachers and parents has left them at breaking point. It has somehow become routine in 2018 Britain for schools to set up crowdfunding pages to ask parents for donations or regular direct debits just to fund workbooks and pens. Just last week, a local school sent home a letter asking local companies to sponsor its PE department. Despite that, the Chancellor had the audacity to come to this House and reward our incredible teachers—teachers who are leaving the profession in despair—with some “little extras”. It is insulting to our teachers—teachers who are leaving the profession in despair—with some “little extras”. It is insulting to our teachers—teachers who are leaving the profession in despair—with some “little extras”.

Cuts have hit our schools hard, but I want to take a moment to consider the impact on children with special educational needs. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for attention deficit hyperactive disorder, I recognise not only the enormous potential of and opportunities for those with SEND, but our duty to help harness the incredible educational gifts that they possess. To allow them to thrive, they need the guidance and assistance to draw out their talent and to fit into the archaic educational structures that we still use. To give just one example of where we are letting pupils down, a recent report from the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy looking at our critical cyber skills gap said:

“We even heard that one of BT Security’s best graduate cryptographers was a music graduate whose ability to recognise patterns in music had proven a useful skill in relation to cryptography. Many of those who provided evidence also pointed to the strengths brought to the cyber security field by ‘neuro-divergent’ individuals, who, we were told, often possess ‘a real talent for logic’.”

There we have a profession with a critical shortage in this country—estimated at around 50,000 specialists—that is crying out for the type of talent and skills that those with conditions such as ADHD possess, and we also know that they are vastly underemployed. However, the processes are simply not there in our education system to bring the most out of these young people. With SEND funding frozen, the future hardly looks bright. Quite simply, society is letting these people down.

Our education system is struggling to cope with the cuts imposed by this Government, but the real travesty is that they come at a time when our education system needs a fundamental, transformative overhaul to raise education standards and become one of the most inclusive education systems in the world. As long as we have a Conservative Government, we will never see the kind of transformation that we need. That is why I support the motion and believe it is now crucial, at this important time for our country, that we end the austerity in our schools and begin investing in our future by creating an education system that truly works for all.

6.10 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Here we are again, talking about school funding two weeks after a Budget, as the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) rightly mentioned.

Do not get me wrong, as a Lib Dem I love my potholes—believe me I do—but I think schools deserve more money than potholes. It was absolutely not the right priority that schools got only £400 million in the Budget, less than potholes. [Interruption.] Indeed, Lib Dems pointing at potholes—my dear favourite. But I would much rather have been pointing at a new school boiler or putting my arm around a teaching assistant who did not have to be let go.

That is why the “little extras” comment was so badly judged. I assume the Chancellor’s speech was not run past the Secretary of State for Education. If it was, I was shocked that his special adviser did not spot it. When I heard the comment, I tensed up inside, because I could hear the teachers in my constituency shouting, “Well, what about every time I reach into my own pocket to pay for pens and paper for the students in my school?”

I am a primary school governor at Botley School, and school governors are now having to make decisions about staffing—the system is at breaking point. They have already downgraded middle management and had reorganisations. In Botley we had to submit a deficit budget, as part of which we had to say that we were going to have some kind of reorganisation. In the end, all that does is put extra stress on the current teachers.

Forest School training has been cut or pared down in a number of schools in my constituency. People who have been to Forest School, perhaps as children, will know just how extraordinary that experience is—I wish I had had it—but that is being cut.

Ofsted has also pointed out in various studies that there is now a narrowing of the curriculum as a result of the cuts, and it is not just the EBacc. Amanda Spielman made it clear in a letter to the Public Accounts Committee just last week that that narrowing of the curriculum is real, that Ofsted has seen it and is very concerned about it.
Teachers across the country would like to hear from the Government that they are listening. The Government talk about more money than ever for schools. If we go back far enough in history, we will find that there is more money now, but it is also about the pressures on schools, with higher numbers of pupils and extra asks from pensions, national insurance contributions and an apprenticeship levy that really does not work.

There is a local school in Abingdon that is desperate to spend the apprenticeship levy funding. There is a maintenance chap and an IT specialist that the school would love to be able to skill up, but the local college does not provide those particular apprenticeships. Where is the joined-up thinking in this Government? It is just not there.

When I talked to the chair of governors at Larkmead School in Abingdon, he put it most aptly: “Do you know what we need? We do not need stuff. We need staff.” It is staff that schools need. As a former teacher, I can say it is that one-to-one interaction with students that is missing.

This is all happening at a time when local government services have been decimated, and we know that. We are now beginning to see it in schools. I am sure other Members, like me, were shocked by the BBC’s story over the weekend about the number of children being held in isolation rooms for five days or more. This is not happening of its own accord; it is a direct result of the closure of Sure Start centres, of the decimation of youth services and of the fact that children’s services just do not have the resources they need.

Schools are picking up the pieces. I have a school in south Abingdon that has its own food bank, because there are kids who cannot afford to eat when they go home at night. They greatly welcome the meal they get when they are at the food bank, but they cannot get that money.

Oxfordshire County Council is now running a consultation to top-slice some of the core schools budget and feed it into SEND provision—I have heard this from other Members from across the House. I am so sad that it should have to do this—it should not have to. Oxfordshire is one of the f40 areas of the country. As for fairer funding, I simply wish that the Government had gone the whole hog and decided to make it properly fair, because the historical unfairness in the system remains. Interestingly, the amount of money that Larkmead School would lose is about £50,000, which is exactly the sum it would have got from the “little extras”. I felt that irony keenly.

There are a couple of things the Government could help schools with. If schools want to be run as businesses, they need some level of medium-term clarity. The two issues that keep coming up at the moment are the pay award for staff and the administration of teachers’ pensions. By the way, the pay award for support staff has not been announced yet, so when will it be? Schools have to submit three-year budgets, yet they do not know where that money is going to come from. If we are serious about properly funding our schools, where is the clarity on the budget, what is going to come out of the spending review and when will this Government finally put education first? Let’s face it, there is no better investment in this country’s future than investment in education.

6.16 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Every child matters—that fundamental idea should unite everybody in this place whenever we discuss education. I start with that point because the belief that every child matters inspired me to go into teaching. My sense of purpose came from supporting each and every child to reach their full potential.

I came into politics because I want to help to build a better world than the one we live in today, and I know millions of others share that dream. But the people who will lead that future are in our classrooms today, and if we fail to invest in them, that vision for the future will be little more than a dream. If we want to make it a reality, we have to be prepared to take a long, hard, critical look at the way the Government have directed and, some might say, designed our education system.

I say that because the IFS figures do not tell the full story. Working in classrooms, I have seen at first hand how Government policy strips resources from schools in other ways, too, with one such resource being teachers’ time. As a teacher, I always recognised the value of balancing knowledge with understanding. The real value of teaching is in equipping children with the ability to problem-solve—to make use of what you have taught them and to apply it to new situations—but it is much cheaper to simply test a child’s ability to retain information.

The crude use of league tables, combined with the growth of the commercialised testing regime, has helped to make the curriculum far more content-based and less concerned with problem solving, a tendency helped along by snapshot inspections by Ofsted. When we also consider that this shift has happened at a time when schools have seen their budgets shrink in real terms, it is no surprise that the curriculum available to our children has also diminished, both in scope and quality. The result is that we end up with stressed out, overworked, underpaid teachers under more and more pressure to teach for the test.

As a teacher, I also recognised the value of co-operation between schools to improve provision across a local area. That could come in the form of sharing best practice or solutions for particular local problems, but it might also come in the form of pooling resources to achieve the same aim. The academisation of our education system has made that particularly difficult, as the schools in our constituencies now act, in many ways, as businesses in direct competition with each other. In addition, the direct payment of SEND funding to academies and free schools has resulted in the loss of the economies of scale provided by a central fund in a local authority area. I could talk for much longer about the consequences of academisation, but the point I wish to make in this debate is that it has contributed to the financial pressures in our schools, and we should not ignore that fact. When we talk about school budgets being £1.7 billion lower in real terms than they were five years ago, the truth is actually much worse.

I truly loved my time as a teacher. Many of the children I taught will never know how much of an impact they made on me, but I hope that in the relatively brief time that I spent with them, I had a lasting impact on their development. As time went on and one colleague after another left the profession, I saw the schools that
[Laura Smith]

I worked in change—not just physically, but in every sense of the word. As workloads and class sizes grew and grew, morale plummeted. We lost some fantastic people—the kind of people we really want in our children’s schools, and not just teachers but teaching assistants and support staff too. The trend has only got worse since I left the profession. For the second year running, there are more teachers leaving the profession than joining it. Our children deserve to be taught by qualified, happy teachers who are paid properly. Teachers, teaching assistants and support staff are all thousands of pounds worse off in real terms compared with 2010 wages.

By the time I left the classroom, I had seen teaching change. Book scrutinies, lesson observations, data input, results, progress, benchmarking, always being Ofsted-ready—all of that took over every single teaching day. I felt that in the middle of this cycle were a load of kids whose confidence was shaken. The need to achieve and succeed outweighed their development as a whole person. If I was seen to spend five minutes talking to one child, even if it meant that that one child finally grasped fractions, I would fail a lesson observation. Little children were telling me that they were “stressed” and that they were “not good enough”. Parents were saying that their children would cry about homework for hours at the weekend. There is something seriously wrong when seven-year-old children feel like that. Primary school is supposed to be the most carefree time of a person’s life.

My own son was born on 29 August—he is the youngest in his class—and he recently told me that he was the worst in his class at writing and that he will never be smart. As a parent, it makes me feel so angry and so sad that my beautiful little boy, who improves every day, has to put up with a school report that just says he is working towards where he should be. He is working his socks off every day. What does that teach him?

6.22 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): One thing that I suspect everybody who is contributing to this debate has in common is that we are immersed in the lives of our local schools and of our constituency. If Members from all parties are honest, I suspect that like me, when they have visited schools over the past two years, or perhaps slightly longer, whether for the Christmas fair, Parliament Week or the school play, they will have found that the subject of school funding comes up in a way that it did not used to come up on such occasions. Often, it will come up not in terms of cash sums, but in terms of staffing cuts; whether the school can support teaching assistants at all; a lack of teaching material; and in particular additional needs funding. Increasingly, it comes up in respect of anything that is outside the main curriculum and the main school day, whether that is breakfast clubs, homework clubs or after-school activities, which are particularly relevant for schools in deprived areas, like much of my constituency. They are really essentials but often are simply not there.

Despite all that, it was something of a surprise that school funding was such a big issue at last year’s general election. I say that because in a general election it tends to be the universal issues that come up. For example, my borough has one of the largest proportions of EU citizens, we have some of the worst housing inequality because of the cost of housing, and the main hospital is under threat of demolition. Nevertheless, not only at the school gates but when I was knocking on doors, the anger over school funding was something that I have not experienced in 35 years of being active in local politics.

Only today, I replied to a headteacher to address some of these points. Let me identify two or three issues from that letter. One, obviously, is the issue of cuts per se. Each one of the 30 schools in my constituency will be losing money over the period 2015 to 2020 because of the disparity that we have heard about this evening between funding and costs. What that will mean is that schools such as Burlington Danes, which has 56% on free school meals, will face a loss of £614 per pupil over that time; Hammersmith Academy, with 60% on free school meals, will face a loss of £644 per pupil; and Phoenix High School, which, with 67% on free school meals, has the most deprived intake of any school in London—probably in the country—will face a loss of £834 per pupil over that five-year period. Those are really unsustainable figures.

In addition to the pure numbers, there are particular losses in particular areas, as we have heard today in relation to early years provision. In nursery schools—yes, we still have some nursery schools in Hammersmith—budgets are under threat. Post-16 education is another area under threat—I have been a governor of the excellent William Morris Sixth Form for the past 25 years, in fact since it was set up. It has had to cut back on staffing in a way that it has never had to do before. These are incredibly difficult decisions to make.

In addition, we have a lack of planning for places. We still have the temporary classrooms that were put up a few years ago for bulge classes. At the same time, because we became the free school capital of the country, we have primary schools that are half empty. This may make me slightly unpopular with my own party, but I have never minded the investment in capital that we have seen—but at what cost? The cancellation of Building Schools for the Future means that redundant old buildings that are not fit for teaching in are still just about standing up, while brand-new schools, which have been built alongside them, are half empty. How is that sensible planning in the education system?

We have talked about fair funding a lot. I am not here to try to take money from other parts of the country, but inner London increasingly gets the worst deal. The Minister will say, “Yes, but historically there has been a higher level of funding in that area.” There are reasons for that—it is because of mobility, because of English being spoken as a second language and because of the real need that does not occur elsewhere except perhaps in other inner-city areas. All those points are made again and again with increasing frustration by teachers, parents, governors and headteachers. This is also happening against the backdrop of an underfunded salaries budget.

In conclusion, I simply say to the Minister that of course there are good things going on in education, and I am sure that he and his colleagues are committed to education, but unless they actually identify the real and genuine lack of resources in our schools, they will never improve standards and they will never turn the corner in a way that I hope all of us here would like.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call Mohammad Yasin on a five-minute limit.
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter).

On the top of overaching cuts to education budgets and undue pressure being heaped on local authorities, Bedford Borough Council has just been hit by an additional cut in its allocation of £1.3 million. That is despite the fact that, by the Government’s own assessment, the council’s funding allocation is below what it should be and it was therefore due to gain from the national funding formula. In reality, per-pupil funding in Bedford is actually falling.

The unexpected cut has come as a huge shock to the council and to school leaders who had planned expenditure based on the expected income, not on the reduced budget as worked out by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. Will the Minister look again at the figures to determine whether, as we believe, an error has been made because the Education and Skills Funding Agency has not allowed for in-year changes connected with Bedford Borough Council going from a two-tier to a three-tier system? The agency has reduced per-pupil school funding for Bedford Borough Council by 0.85% for primary schools and 1.55% for secondary schools. If those sums are not rectified, instead of increased funding per pupil, every average-sized primary school class in Bedford will be £1,000 worse off and every average-sized secondary school class will be £1,600 worse off. That is not what the funding formula promised to deliver. This Government promised extra funding, but we cannot see it anywhere.

The last thing that council officers in Bedford want to do is pass on the loss to schools that are already struggling to make ends meet, but with further cuts to local authorities in the pipeline it will be hard for them to avoid doing so. Hard-working teachers and local schoolchildren do not deserve this. After all, it is their education and their futures that are at stake here. We should be investing in the next generation, not compromising the quality of their schools. At the very least, schools deserve the same funding as before, or better still, the extra funding that the Government promised.

Will the Minister confirm how much contingency funding the Department for Education has in its budget for the dedicated schools grant? Will he also agree to meet me and representatives from Bedford Borough Council to urgently address the issue and order funding to be frozen, rather than cut at a cost of £1.3 million?

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to this well timed and important debate. There are so many issues that we could be discussing today.

I could talk about some of the challenges that schools have raised with me, including the fact that they are facing more children with additional needs, particularly mental health issues, behaviour disorders, Asperger’s and autism. I could mention the fact that schools have had to make cuts, which have pretty much landed on teaching assistants. I could also talk about the high and increasing number of children experiencing neglect, and the schools that are being expected to pick up the pieces of hungry and unwashed kids—going far beyond the core purpose of schools and what they are expected to provide.

I could mention the challenges faced by my local sixth-form college, Franklin College, which has not had an increase in funding and is not afforded the same financial advantages as academy schools. I could also mention the sixth form that so feared loss of funding that it was unable to make provision for a student who was experiencing significant anxiety issues; it could not make reasonable adjustments to accommodate that student. The Government should look at that matter.

While the Secretary of State was lauding the state of education in this country, my hon. Friend for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) tells me that her son’s school is shutting at 12 o’clock every Friday to save money, and it is not the only school in her constituency doing so. Things really are not as rosy in the Secretary of State’s garden as he would have us believe.

However, I want to focus my comments on the two state-maintained nurseries in my constituency: Scartho Nursery School and Great Coates Village Nursery School, which are both under threat. They currently provide outstanding early years provision, yet have funding certainty only until 2019-20. There is enormous stress and pressure for the headteachers coping with this uncertainty, trying to reassure parents and keep their staff. In fact, they are more than headteachers as we know them, acting as teaching assistant, playground supervisor, secretary, dinner lady and cleaner to their nursery schools, unable to afford cover staff and told that they must plan to fundraise for the additional £100,000 a year that they will need to keep their doors open.

When I have raised this issue with Ministers previously, they have simply tried to pass the buck and told me that I should go to my local authority to get the additional funding to support the schools. But areas such as my constituency are in significant need. Around 30% of our children are deemed to be in poverty and we have had £80 million cut from our local authority budgets over the past few years. These authorities are so stretched in having to prioritise those who are most in need. When schools are centrally funded, why should state-maintained nurseries be expected to compete in the crowded local authority arena with adult social care, public health and enforcement, given that other schools are not required to do so?

The Secretary of State has referred to a number of outstanding providers, and I have absolutely no doubt that he will have used my nurseries’ outstanding status to reinforce his statistics. So why does he do no more than cherry-pick the benefits rather than giving them the long-term certainty that they deserve? To keep providing this outstanding level of education, they would happily forgo the kind words in exchange for the cold, hard cash. The Government say that they are concerned to give good-quality education to all children regardless of their background, ability or disability. This is precisely what my nurseries do. Children with Down’s syndrome play and learn alongside multilingual children and children with autism—genuinely children of all abilities, with different skills, not segregated but part of a community.

My nurseries are the very definition of equality, providing the seeds of social mobility. They deserve far greater consideration than they currently get from this Government.

I know that parents in my constituency value and respect these settings and the excellent start they give their children. They do not want to see quality suffer as
attention is lost to fundraising activity. In the social mobility index compiled by the House of Commons Library, on almost every ranking—the school life, youth life and adult life stages—Great Grimsby falls into the bottom 20% in the country. Overall, Great Grimsby is 459th out of 533. On every measure, on every expectation, in every stage of our lives, my constituents are being failed by the Government—except in early years, and that is due in no small part to those state-maintained nurseries.

6.36 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who painted a disturbing picture but one that I very much recognise from my own constituency experience. I want first to pay tribute to Oxfordshire’s headteachers for all the work that they are doing to gather information about the situation facing local schools, which is very similar to the picture painted by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

Time is very short, so I want to focus my remarks specifically on provision for children with social, emotional and mental health needs. The Secretary of State shied away from offering us much detail on provision for children with special educational needs, beyond saying that we need a balance between mainstream and special school provision. Obviously we would all agree with that. He did not say anything about provision for children with social, emotional and mental health needs, so I hope that the Minister will come to that when he winds up.

SEND provision in mainstream schools in Oxford is under enormous pressure. Specialist resources have been cut in the majority of local schools in my city, and many of my constituents are telling me a very similar story to that outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley). Many families are having to home educate their children because they have no other choice now that that support is no longer available in mainstream schools.

Special schools are also under strain. That is being exacerbated by the free schools system, not solved by it. The Secretary of State found the time to write a very partisan letter to me—and, I presume, to other Labour MPs—to ask if I supported my local free school. Of course I support local parents, local teachers and local educationists, but what I do not and never will support, and what he should not support, is a situation where our local authorities are not able themselves to assess the need for new educational resources in their areas. The only possibility of getting new provision is by chance: it is all dependent on whether there happens to be a free school sponsor available, and on where they want to put the new school rather than on where the need is.

A very good example of that is what has happened to Northfield School in my constituency—a special school for boys with social, emotional and mental health needs. It is falling apart. Half the boys from that school are now being educated in Portakabin; the other half are being educated at an outdoor education centre while their school is patched up for the short term. In any rational situation, the local authority would be funded so that it could rebuild the school. Instead, we are in limbo, hoping that a free school sponsor might come along and help to provide a new school in Oxford for children who need that support. It is not good enough for those boys, and it is not good enough for the hard-working teachers who are trying to deliver them a decent education.

The Government have got to get a grip on this, otherwise a whole cohort of children with social, emotional and mental health needs will miss the education that they deserve. There are now families in my constituency who cannot find a single school that is willing or able to educate their child who has social, emotional or mental health needs. I am sure that other Members have spoken to similar constituents. The lack of accountability in our education system is massively failing those children, who are among the most vulnerable. This has got to change, and I hope the Minister will deal with it in his remarks.

6.40 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): We have heard today of the impact of Tory austerity on education and of funding being slashed across every area of the Department, with early years, schools and further and higher education all being hit. Education urgently needs new investment right across the board. The Government must finally begin reversing their devastating cuts if they are to implement the Prime Minister’s promise that austerity is over.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Education Secretary have both stated in the House that every school in England will see a cash-terms increase in their funding, yet that flies in the face of what we have heard in the Chamber today and the reality of what parents and teachers are telling us is happening on the ground. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has stated that that is simply not accurate, and the UK Statistics Authority has rebuked the Education Secretary for that inaccuracy. There has been a concerted effort by the Secretary of State and the Minister for School Standards to fudge the figures and deflect attention away from the funding cuts that they have presided over.

To add insult to injury, there was then the one-off £400 million for the Chancellor’s “little extras”—an insult to the teachers, schools and children who have faced year after year of Tory cuts. But we did get one thing today: we got a calculator for every school from the Secretary of State. The whole House should rejoice with me at that.

The fact is that across the whole country, including in the Prime Minister’s own constituency, schools are having to write home to parents to ask for money to buy basic resources. They do not need money for little extras; they need money for the essentials. According to the IFS data, school budgets are £1.7 billion lower in real terms than they were five years ago, which means that 91% of schools are still facing real-terms budget cuts per pupil.

The Minister will again no doubt try to deflect the House’s attention away from the reality of the impact of his Government’s cuts to school funding, but Members in this House—even including Members on the Government Benches—know all too well the impact on the ground already, because headteachers and parents are telling us about it almost daily. An early indication is that the shortfall for 2019-20 will be £3.8 billion. To use the Budget to give potholes more money than schools is a sorry reflection of this Government’s priorities.
Sadly it is clear that austerity is not over for our schools. We are now in the unprecedented situation of unions taking the step of simultaneously consulting their respective members on what action to take next. It beggars belief that the Government have ignored the School Teachers’ Review Body recommendation of a 3.5% increase for all pay and allowance across the board—the first time that that has happened in the body’s 28-year history. To make matters worse, the Government expect schools to meet the costs of the first 1% of the pay award from existing budgets, which have already been cut to the bone.

The picture is no better in early years. Sure Start funding has been cut by two thirds, and more than 1,000 centres have gone since 2010. The Government must honour the commitment to their flagship policy of 30 hours of free childcare with more money from the Treasury. It was recently revealed that most providers are having to increase the fees they charge parents as a consequence of Government’s underfunding, with 85% of local authorities facing even more cuts to their 30-hours funding.

While we have been debating this afternoon, the impacts have got worse. The Secretary of State has slipped out, through a written statement, the announcement that he is sending a commissioner into Northamptonshire County Council, where the children’s services have been found inadequate by Ofsted. He may well take off his glasses and wonder what I am talking about, but this has happened this afternoon. Ofsted has warned that vulnerable children are not being “effectively assessed, supported or protected.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) said, austerity is not over for our children. Will the Minister commit to coming back to the House to make an oral statement about this, and urge his colleagues finally to tackle the funding crisis facing children’s services across our country?

TES is reporting, as we speak, that children in residential care are waiting for more than three months for a school place. Labour’s national education service will guarantee the needed investment to deliver 30 hours of high-quality education to all two to four-year-olds.

In further education, the theme continues: austerity is not over in our sixth forms and colleges. Further education has suffered the most vicious of all Tory cuts to education, with budgets slashed by £3 billion in real terms since 2010. This is one quarter of all further education funding. Nothing has been done even to begin reversing this. If the Chancellor really means austerity is ending, he must end the base funding rate system and reinvest in sixth forms and colleges.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman says that nothing has been done. Will he at least welcome the 25% increase in funding that comes with the new T-levels? Does he welcome the new T-levels?

Mike Kane: They will not come in until 2022, and the Conservatives have already cut billions from the higher education service.

As a direct consequence of the Government scrapping maintenance grants, our poorest students graduate with the highest debts. No one should be put off university due to a lack of money because of a fear of debt. Labour believes that education should be free. We will restore that principle and reintroduce maintenance grants for the most in need.

It is my great honour to thank everybody who has participated in the debate today.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Kane: I will not give way now because I want to get through the vote of thanks.

Normally I would thank people on my side of the House—I thank you all; well done, the lot of you—but what I really want to do is thank some Conservative Members, such as the Secretary of State himself. He fails to stand up and say “little extras” to anyone. Just to let him know: the cuts in Hampshire are £16.8 million, Dumfri. [Interruption.]

May I concur with the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) about how well schools and schoolteachers have done to commemorate the armistice brilliantly this weekend and over the past few months? However, I also tell him that the cuts to his local authority are £14.2 million since 2015.

I now come to the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng)—this is my favourite bit—who makes the same speech every time. Honestly, there is a sparsity of facts, and he does need to mix it up once or twice.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The reason why I make the same speech every time is that the hon. Gentleman finds it very difficult to appreciate the force of the argument, which he never addresses.

Mike Kane: Following a speech that lacked so many facts, I will give the hon. Gentleman one: Surrey, which covers his constituency, has faced £14.2 million of cuts since 2015.

My good friend the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) was a great left winger on the parliamentary football team as we beat the military veterans today, but he was no left winger in this Chamber. He needs to mix it up as well, because there was a sparsity of facts. Suffolk is suffering from £7.8 million of cuts.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) actually spoke quite eloquently and has a good grasp of schools and what is needed in his constituency, but Devon is facing £16.3 million of cuts.

Kevin Foster: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Kane: No. I have given way quite enough.

I say to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) that east Sussex has experienced £7.7 million of cuts. We missed the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) at the football today, but he cannot blame the situation on the Greater Manchester spatial strategy or the Mayor of Greater Manchester—this is down to the fact that Bolton has faced cuts of £10.4 million since 2015.

I will wind up. I speak as a former primary schoolteacher. We go into teaching because we believe in the value of education and its power to create social mobility and ambition for all. That is why Labour has worked with parents, teachers and professionals across the land to
introduce a national education service, and it is why that national education service does not promise “little extras”. This is about our children’s future—the future of the country—and little extras simply will not do.

6.50 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): There is nothing more important to the future of a child than a rigorous academic education in an orderly, safe and nurturing environment—an education that allows every child to fulfil their potential and equips them with the knowledge of the world around them so that they can take on the challenges of that world, an education steeped in the achievements of generations of scientists, and the literature, music and art that lies at the heart of our humanity, and an education system that ensures that they have the language, literacy and maths skills that enable them to function and to learn more. That should be the start of every child’s life, whether that child is from a wealthy family or a family on a low income, whether they are in the north or the south-west, or whether they are in London or in Manchester. That has been the driving force of this Government since 2010: to raise standards in our schools; to improve the curriculum; to put our education system on a par with the best in the world; to close the attainment gap between those from different backgrounds; and to ensure that every child is a fluent reader long before they leave primary school.

Our reform programme has been opposed by the Labour party every step of the way. In office, those complacent, ideological enemies of promise and close-knit friends of the vested interests presided over grade inflation, falling standards and an education system that left too many children starting secondary school still struggling with reading and basic arithmetic, because Labour was too afraid to challenge the status quo. Labour failed to introduce fairer funding because it was controversial. We have not shirked our responsibility. The new national funding formula ensures that every pupil in the country is funded on the same basis according to need. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) needs to read up about that.

Labour failed to rise to the challenge of increasing pupil numbers, cutting 200,000 primary school places at a time when the birth rate was rising. One of the first decisions we took after 2010 was to double the funding for new school places to £5 billion. Since then, we have created 825,000 new school places and committed £23 billion of capital funding for 2016 to 2021.

At a time when we are tackling the historically high and unsustainable budget deficit left to us by the last Labour Government, we have none the less protected overall school funding for five to 16-year-olds in real terms, and now spend a record £42.4 billion, which is rising to £43.5 billion next year.

Gareth Snell rose—

Jess Phillips rose—

Nick Gibb: I will not give way because—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Jess Phillips: I’m really cross.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If you are really cross, find somewhere else to show your bad temper. In here, Members have put questions to the Minister and we all want to hear what he has to say. We may not agree with him—that is up to you—but we must hear the Minister.

Nick Gibb: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We heard nothing from Labour about the proportion of pupils taking history or geography GCSE rising from 63% in 2010 to 77% in 2017, with the proportion taking at least two science GCSEs rising from 63% in 2010 to 91% in 2017.

The Labour party opposes free schools—state schools established by teachers, education groups and high-performing schools, rather than local councils—which are disproportionately graded as outstanding. Free schools such as Dixons Trinity Academy in Bradford would not exist but for this Government. With a third of its pupils from a disadvantaged background, Dixons Trinity was
ninth in the country last year for Progress 8, and 82% of its pupils entered for the EBacc, rising to 86% this year. Free schools such as Harris Westminster would not exist but for this Government. It told us that, with 40% of its intake from disadvantaged backgrounds, 18 pupils secured places at Oxbridge this year and one at Harvard. Six of those 18 were from a disadvantaged background. The King’s College London Mathematics School would not exist but for this Government. It takes students from all backgrounds, with last year 59% of its A-level grades being A* and 92% of its maths A-levels being A*. The free schools programme would be abolished by Labour, the enemy of promise and the enemy of social mobility.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) spoke with sincerity about the exemplary work of the schools in his constituency, which teach about Parliament and the first world war. I enjoyed seeing the high standards and phenomenal work at Alverton Primary School in Penzance and at St Erth Community School in Hayle at his invitation last year. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) spoke perceptively about reading standards and mathematics, and about the improvement in standards in his schools and the importance of T-levels. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) spoke knowledgeably about reading and the rise in Progress 8 and Attainment 8 in his schools.

This is a Government who have put education reform at the heart of their programme, who are committed to ensuring every school is a good school, who have delivered fairer funding, who are spending record amounts on education and schools, on a par with the largest economies—

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question put accordingly and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the Institute for Fiscal Studies’ finding that education spending as a share of national income has fallen from 5.8 per cent to 4.3 per cent since 2010, including funding cuts of over two thirds to Sure Start, of nearly a tenth to schools, of over a fifth to sixth forms, and of £3 billion to further and adult education; further notes the Prime Minister’s statement that austerity is over; endorses the Secretary of State for Education’s recent demand for billions more funding and welcomes his comments that there is a strong case for investment in the spending review but notes that the recent Budget provided only small capital projects; offers its full support to the Secretary of State for Education in persuading the Chancellor of the Exchequers that education urgently needs new investment; and calls on the Government to end austerity, not with little extras but by reversing all cuts to education funding.

Business without Debate

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)).

That, at this day’s sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Kelly Tolhurst relating to ending seasonal changes of time (reasoned opinion).—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)).

ENDING SEASONAL CHANGES OF TIME

(REASONED OPINION)

That this House considers that the draft Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on discontinuing seasonal changes of time and repealing Directive 2000/84/EC (European Union Document No. 12118/18 and Addendum 1) does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity for the reasons set out in Chapter 1 of the Forty-Second Report of the European Scrutiny Committee (HC 301-xl); and, in accordance with Article 6 of Protocol No. 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, instructs the Clerk of the House to forward this reasoned opinion to the Presidents of the European Institutions.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Some time ago I raised concerns that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) had been making repeated incursions into my constituency without giving me the courtesy of a notification that he was doing so. I understand from his social media feed that he has done that five times over the past few weeks without sending me an email. Furthermore, he met a UK Government Minister to discuss an issue about a facility that is to be based in my constituency. Mr Deputy Speaker, this is discourteous—it is verging on harassment now—and I am really getting quite fed up with it. Can you advise me on what I might do to bring this matter to his attention?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is a convention of the House that whoever goes into another’s constituency lets that Member know that they are going. It might be worth taking this up outside the Chamber, but it is a convention that such a thing should not take place. The hon. Lady has now mentioned it.

PETITIONS

Universal Credit Roll out

7.1 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition from my constituents regarding the universal credit roll-out. While that is still at an early stage in my constituency, it is causing immense distress, as is evidenced by my constituency casework. By far the greatest concern is the reduction in benefits and the lack of income during the assessment period, but that is not the only concern. Many people are reporting that when they are moving from employment and support allowance, determinations of limited capability for work that should go with them are not doing so, and that is causing great and undue distress. Also, terminally ill claimants are now having to upload their own DS1500 forms, instead of third parties being able to do so on their behalf. I fully endorse this petition from my constituents.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk, Declares that the roll out of Universal Credit in the local area will have a devastating impact on communities across the district and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people.
Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Bowes ward in my constituency of Enfield, Southgate. Three hundred and seventy-seven petitioners have signed it to highlight the serious blight of heavy traffic and pollution on their lives. By way of background, I should explain that the area of Bowes is bound by two sides of the A406 north circular road and, as such, is heavily used as a cut-through.

Extremely high volumes of traffic lead to speeding safety risks, particularly to children, as well as severe pollution, and have a very negative impact on residents' quality of life. Dangerous levels of air pollution mean that primary school children have regularly been banned from playing outside in their playgrounds. The petitioners therefore urge

the House of Commons to encourage Enfield Council to implement a live trial of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in Bowes Ward, as well as to encourage Enfield Council, Transport for London, and the Department of Transport to work together to find the funding for this proposal.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Bowes Ward,
Declares that a live trial of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in Bowes Ward should be implemented; further notes that the fact that the ward is bounded on two sides by the A406 North Circular means that the ward is heavily used as a cut-through and for access to the North Circular; further that this leads to extremely high volumes of traffic which, in turn, causes dangerously high air pollution levels, damage to residents’ vehicles, speeding and safety risks to the students of the nearby primary school; further that, overall, the traffic in the area has a severe impact on the quality of life of residents; believes that implementing a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in Bowes would be of great benefit to residents and the area as a whole; and further notes that a Low Traffic Neighbourhood has already been built in Walthamstow Village and has been an enormous success, providing residents with a quieter, safer place to live in a now much regenerated area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to encourage Enfield Council to implement a live trial of a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in Bowes Ward, as well as to encourage Enfield Council, Transport for London, and the Department of Transport to work together to find the funding for this proposal.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]
last week, on 2 November, I was notified that during the latest round of discussions their reactions suddenly had been mixed. Douglas Grove surgery is still strongly supportive, but there is less enthusiasm and support from the other practices.

I will touch on many aspects of health, but the purpose of the debate really is to ask the Minister and his Department to go back to the CCG and, where they can, to GPs to ensure that we deliver a new centre for the residents of Witham town and the surrounding area. They want answers, and they deserve action and delivery.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have always been here to support the right hon. Lady over the years, and I am pleased to be able to do so again tonight. She mentioned action, and I want to refer to that very quickly. Given the pressure that nurses and healthcare professionals are under in every trust area—including my own, by the way—does she agree that the Government must consider a complete overhaul of the way in which things are done in the NHS? We want to see action rather than words. We do not want to see reviews or reports. We want to see action. Is that not what it is all about?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Ultimately, we should be seeking to drive health outcomes. As I have said in the House again and again over the last eight years, we can achieve that through integration of our health services at a community level. Driving outcomes is the very purpose of the facility in Witham town. We should think about the integration of mental health services, ambulance services and all sorts of prescribing, including social prescribing, and about the future of social care and healthcare.

However, this is not just about Witham town. I represent many neighbouring villages. Tiptree, which is well known for its jams—I am sure that you have sampled some of them, Mr Deputy Speaker—has a large and growing population, but it also has just 3.28 full-time equivalent GPs to serve a population of more than 11,000. That is a patient-GP ratio of 3,400 to one, which is more than twice the national average, and it needs to be addressed. Branch surgeries have been lost in Birch and Tolleshunt D’Arcy in recent years, and there is a growing population in Stanway and Hatfield Peverel. All that places more strain on GPs, so the integration of services is vital. We are hoping to increase the GP base through a new partnership at Anglia Ruskin University, at whose new medical school the first wave of GPs will be trained.

One of those neighbouring villages, Silver End, is expanding provision but has a terrible history. I know that the Minister will be aware of Virgin Care Services, which has run the Silver End general practice since 2016. This year’s rating from the Care Quality Commission was “inadequate”. Members speak about money and funds. Interestingly enough, Virgin is paid £134.37 per patient, 60% more than the standard payment of £83.64 that other GPs receive. That is a staggering sum: it seems that Virgin is almost being rewarded for failure. Just two months ago it failed to refrigerate its flu vaccines, which meant that a batch had to be disposed of. That wasted taxpayers’ money, and also caused local problems with flu vaccinations at a critical time.

I want to touch on some wider issues affecting social care in the Essex County Council area. To its credit, the council has worked diligently to address social and winter pressures. I welcome the additional £5.9 million for the council from the £240 million that was announced last month, and, of course, the Budget funding as well, but, as the county council has said, we want to see a meaningful Green Paper when it comes to social care funding. A new Witham multi-purpose healthcare facility will make a positive difference, enabling us to integrate funds and care and drive better outcomes and performance.

That brings me to another company that is in the news. A CQC judgment on Allied Healthcare highlighted a considerable risk of service disruption to the delivery of domiciliary care services, which has caused much concern. Essex County Council is one of Allied Healthcare’s biggest clients, and has been working with the CQC and the company, but we want to be certain that the Department itself is aware of the situation and able to help to resolve it. We need clarity about some of the services that could be at risk.

There is also much more work to do in relation to social prescribing. Last week I held an advice and information fair in Witham, which focused largely on the older demographic in the constituency, but was also concerned with healthcare provision through charities and other voluntary organisations. Another issue that I think we should consider—and a new healthcare centre at Witham would help with this as well—is how patient commissioning and NHS referral systems can be improved.

My final point is about the delivery of mental health services. The Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust has been in the news today because of a police investigation into the deaths of 25 patients who were under its care. The Department knows of a case involving one of my constituents, a mother who has been fighting for justice and accountability for years. Today we have learned that the police inquiry has concluded. What they have found might not have led to a charge of manslaughter, but there are serious problems that still need to be addressed.

There are so many health issues that obviously need to be addressed, but the purpose of this debate is to drive the change and produce the outcomes we want to see in Witham town in terms of the delivery of the new health centre. I trust that the Minister will be able to help us: that he will be able to help my constituents overcome the challenges we are now facing with the CCG and GPs in Witham town to deliver this new health service.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) on putting a lot of things on the record in a very short space of time and on securing the debate.

My right hon. Friend and I entered the House together eight and a half years ago and have known each other for even longer; I know that she is a strong campaigner and has been for years, and was delighted when she got the seat of Witham. She has been an incredibly strong voice for her constituents, alongside her work for our country and Government. Like me in Winchester, she wants to do all she can to make sure her constituents have the very best health services. I know that the development of the Witham primary care centre is a cause that has been close to her heart for a long time; she has mentioned it in this House a number of times, and I am sure she will mention it again.
The Mid Essex clinical commissioning group and the local GP practices are best placed to know how to organise the local health services; it is right that they are making decisions about how people in Witham can have access to the high-quality general practice that I know my right hon. Friend wants them to have, and that they get it when and where they need it. But it is absolutely her place and her right to press them for the outcome and the results that her constituents want and expect, and that she wants and expects as their representative.

I understand that Mid Essex CCG wrote to my right hon. Friend last week outlining its full commitment to the creation of a health hub in Witham and reiterating that developing multidisciplinary centres—which is where we want to see primary care move—to promote the health and wellbeing of the population is a central tenet of the Live Well strategy for her area; so far, so good. I understand that local GP practices also support the multidisciplinary hub, but are concerned about the potential impact of the potential relocation into a new building on the financial stability of their practices.

I have seen the correspondence between my right hon. Friend and the CCG. The CCG feels that it is important to distinguish between the support of GP practices for the new hub and a commitment to wholesale relocation into it. That is why the CCG is working with local GP practices to explore and understand the potential impact on their businesses—these are of course businesses that we contract to the NHS—and to find the right solution to meet the growing needs of the town, as my right hon. Friend outlined.

As my right hon. Friend also said, the Fern House surgery is exploring opportunities to redevelop its existing surgery, and I understand that the surgery’s partners support those plans. The CCG intends to explore them further, but very much hopes that such development might, should it go ahead, give Fern House additional financial security to consider later relocation into the new hub. I further understand that any redevelopment of Fern House should not present a risk to the development of the new hub.

Dr Salau, a GP at the Douglas Grove surgery and a member of the CCG board, tells me that there is sufficient interest from other local GP partners in taking space in the new development, and that it might proceed without wholesale relocation from other practices. The CCG will be undertaking a piece of work with Dr Salau over the next four weeks to understand the viability of his proposal, and I know my right hon. Friend will follow that work closely. The CCG has made it clear to me ahead of tonight that it is working closely with her and ensuring that she is kept fully abreast of developments—although I suspect she would be regardless. I know that she will take the opportunity to keep her foot on the pedal and will not be shy in raising this issue again locally and here in Parliament if things do not go as she wants.

I can say the following, however. The health system in England is devolved; that is what we decided to do under the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We want the NHS locally to structure itself to create multidisciplinary teams. However, when we talk of structures and who has the keys to new buildings, it is important to get that bit right. That is a necessity, of course, but not as a replacement for improved services for our constituents. I think the message that my right hon. Friend has given tonight in the House tonight, which I am happy to echo, is: let us get it right, but let us get on with it. It sounds as though this has been a bit of an old chestnut for her and her constituents, and that it has gone on for way too long. I will support her in saying that we should get on with this, and I can assure her that I will be taking an interest in the work of Dr Salau over the next four weeks.

In addition to talking about the Witham primary care centre, my right hon. Friend has reiterated the need for improved access to GP services for her constituents. As the Minister with responsibility for primary care, I know that primary care literally comes first in our health service, and rightly so. It has always been the bedrock of the NHS, and it always will be as long as we are in office. The Secretary of State and I have made that absolutely clear, but we know that primary care is under more pressure than ever, and we are taking steps nationally to address that. I think that those steps will benefit her constituents and mine, and I take very seriously the ratios that she has put on record tonight. I want to outline a couple of the things that we are doing.

Because we recognise the pressure that general practice is under and the shortage of numbers, we are investing an extra £2.4 billion a year into general practice by 2021. We also have the new investment announced in the Budget at the end of last month. The Government have also recently announced additional medical places at Anglia Ruskin University to train the next generation of Essex doctors. We do not mandate our trainees to remain in the towns and cities where they train, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend will remain reassured to hear that doctors are much more likely to stay in the areas where they have trained, and I hope that many will see their long-term future in Essex.

More widely, we know that the NHS needs more GPs, and we are still determined to deliver the commitment to recruit 5,000 additional GPs. That will take longer than we had initially hoped, but we are training more GPs than ever. More than 3,000 doctors are expected to be recruited into GP training this year, following record numbers of recruits last year, so that is positive.

Let me touch on the GP partnership review, which my good friend Dr Nigel Watson is doing for us in Government. We are committed not only to recruiting more GPs but to making general practice a more attractive place to work. The GP partnership review, which the previous Secretary of State set up, will consider how best to reinvigorate the partnership model. We in England believe in the partnership model. We think that it has brought much to general practice and we want to support it, but we understand that it has to change in order to make general practice a better and more attractive place to work. The partnership review has announced its initial findings, and it is now working with Ministers towards its final conclusions. I very much look forward to seeing them.

My right hon. Friend talked about the Silver End surgery and Virgin Care. I feel that I should begin by flagging up the fact that 96% of GP surgeries in England have been rated good or outstanding in the recent Care Quality Commission reports. That shows the excellent work not that we as Ministers are doing but that GPs
and their multidisciplinary teams are doing every day, given the pressures on the frontline. However, where quality and safety standards are not in place, robust steps should of course be taken. My understanding is that NHS England and the Mid Essex CCG are having regular improvement board meetings with senior managers from Virgin Care Services Ltd to closely monitor the remedial actions agreed through their overall improvement plans. That includes addressing outstanding areas of concern from the CQC and is all with the aim of ensuring compliance in advance of the next CQC follow-up inspection.

I was very concerned to hear what my right hon. Friend said about the flu vaccine. It is absolutely mission-critical for me, for the Government, for the country and for the NHS that we get the flu vaccination numbers up to where they were last year and beyond, because that is absolutely the best way of protecting against what can be a very dangerous virus as we move into December and the new year.

My right hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Witham also talked about Allied Healthcare, and I can tell her that there is no disruption to any services that it currently provides. Her constituents and those in other affected areas can be reassured that the CQC’s decision allows local authorities the time they need to ensure continuity of care and support. The Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), is speaking to the key parties involved on an ongoing basis to ensure the importance of them working together to ensure continuity of care and to provide reassurance to individuals and their families and to staff. My officials and those of my ministerial colleague are working closely with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the Local Government Association to establish whether local authorities need any help to prepare to meet individual care needs if services are disrupted due to business failure.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham also highlighted the importance of social care funding. We have given councils access to up £3.6 billion more dedicated funding for adult social care in 2018-19 and recently announced an additional £650 million of new money for social care in 2019-20. That includes an additional £240 million for adult social care to alleviate winter pressures on the NHS next year. She was right to say that we must of course ensure that our care and support system is sustainable in the long term, and our social care Green Paper, which will be published shortly—I cannot be more definitive than that—will set out how we will do that.

My right hon. Friend talked about mental health services, which are a priority for the Prime Minister and this Government. She gave an update on the investigation into the serious incidents reported at the Linden Centre. As the House will appreciate, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the specific issues of the case, but I do of course extend my sincere condolences to the families who have lost loved ones. Our thoughts are with them. The police investigation has concluded, but the Health and Safety Executive investigation into the care of some patients by the former North Essex Partnership University Foundation Trust is ongoing, and we will of course follow that closely and respond in due course.

I am pleased that my right hon. Friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham also highlighted the important role of social prescribing. It is playing an increasingly important role in the health service, in primary care in England, and in her constituency. I am a huge believer that social prescribing can play a big role in our prevention agenda. We launched the prevention strategy last week, and we are now working on the prevention Green Paper for next year. We recently published our vision to help people live well for longer, because prevention truly is better than cure, something that the new Secretary of State and I passionately believe in. I hope that my right hon. Friend and her constituents will contribute examples of excellent social prescribing practice in Essex to our forthcoming Green Paper. We are all ears and want to hear more about it.

I hope that I have addressed many of the issues that my right hon. Friend touched on. As I said at the start, options for the development of the Witham primary care centre are a matter not for Ministers but for the local NHS, which is best placed to take the important decisions that matter to local people, for the benefit of local patients. However, I reiterate that structures are important but services trump all, and we need to see the situation resolved. I have every confidence that local commissioners and GPs will make the right choices, but they should know that my right hon. Friend and I are watching closely to ensure that every one of her constituents has access to high-quality, modern primary care provision. I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend will stay on their case. I thank her for bringing these matters to the House this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Postal Voting System

1. John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the integrity of the postal voting system in local and national elections.

Chloe Smith: The British public deserve to have confidence in our democracy, and the Government are committed to ensuring that our electoral system, including postal voting, is fit for the future. Next year, Peterborough and Pendle will pilot improvements to the security of postal voting. The Electoral Commission’s evaluation of some similar 2018 pilots was published in July.

John Grogan: Does the Minister acknowledge that the combination of postal voting on demand in Great Britain, but not in Northern Ireland, and large extended family networks sometimes gives rise to accusations of undue influence? What safeguards can be put in place?

Chloe Smith: I would condemn any such undue influence, and I suspect that the hon. Gentleman and I agree on that wholeheartedly. It is really important that postal voters are aware that their vote is theirs alone. That was the subject of a major awareness campaign at past local elections, and we hope to see similar again.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend examine what happened at the local elections last year, particularly those in London? Large numbers of voters were added to the register, had postal votes and then disappeared off the electoral register very soon afterwards. There are clearly potentially fraudulent activities at work.

Chloe Smith: I would certainly expect returning officers to look into that carefully, and I would support them in their efforts to do so. It is difficult for me to make any more detailed comments on that from the Dispatch Box, but in general terms we certainly wish to keep the postal voting process secure and safe and to ensure that that process contributes to the overall integrity of our elections.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister assure the House that if there is an early general election, our postal vote system is robust enough and able to cope?

Chloe Smith: Yes, but I do not expect it to have to.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does the Minister share my view that strengthening the integrity of the postal voting system will ensure that our electoral system is fit for the future?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do, which is why I refer again to the pilots that I mentioned in my first answer. They will be important to give voters reassurance and confidence that our system is doing what we expect it to do and thus that our elections overall are secure.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister accept that we must ensure that there is no repeat of what happened in the most recent election in Northern Ireland, where, because the proxy and postal vote system did not require people to produce photographic ID, there was a 600% increase in such voting in one constituency, resulting in a perversion of democracy?

Chloe Smith: I am happy to take a closer look at the figure that the hon. Gentleman cites and the specifics of that case. I mention again the pilots that we have tested in 2018 and that will run again in 2019, which are about helping voters to be confident that the whole system—not only postal and proxy voting but the rest of the electoral system—is secure, by means of looking into ways for voters to identify themselves and show that they are who they say they are.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Eric Pickles’s report “Securing the ballot” suggested that postal ballot applications should have to be made every three years. Is my hon. Friend looking into that suggestion?

Chloe Smith: I am grateful to Sir Eric Pickles, as was—

Chris Green: Lord Pickles, now.

Chloe Smith: Indeed. I am grateful to Lord Pickles for his report and his work, and we are looking carefully at the huge majority of his recommendations and taking them forward wherever we can.

Infected Blood Inquiry

2. Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the progress of the infected blood inquiry.

[907573]

7. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the progress of the infected blood inquiry.

[907578]
The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The inquiry has now completed its preliminary hearings and plans to start its formal public hearings at the end of April 2019. Between now and then, the inquiry will hold public meetings in 18 places throughout the United Kingdom to enable people who have been affected or infected to express their views to the inquiry team. The inquiry has appointed 1,289 core participants, of whom 1,272 are people who have been either infected or affected by contaminated blood.

Mike Amesbury: What steps will the Minister take to repair the damaged relationship with those infected, whose confidence in the Government has been undermined by the fiasco around their entitlement to legal aid and now by the failure of the Cabinet Office to swiftly notify Departments not to destroy relevant files?

Mr Lidington: As far as legal aid is concerned, more than £250,000 has been provided to those affected by this scandal to help them pay for their legal representation. As regards the other matter that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, this was an honest mistake caused by an administrative error. We explained that in full in the form of a written statement to the House and apologised to the inquiry as soon as it was discovered. All Departments, other than the Legal Aid Agency and the Courts and Tribunals Service, have now confirmed that no relevant records were destroyed during the relevant period.

Jef Smith: Last month, the chair of the inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, said that many victims of the infected blood scandal are still living on the breadline today. The inquiry is not due to look at financial support until 2020, so what more can now can the Government do to help the people affected?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, different compensation packages have been agreed by the Department of Health and Social Care in the different parts of the United Kingdom. Sir Brian did ask the Government to look at the case for some additional measures, which are being considered by the Secretary of State for Health and his ministerial team, and the Minister responsible for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is very willing to talk to the inquiry team about that. 1

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The very comprehensive nature of this inquiry is important, and it is also important that it should have a timeframe that is kept to. Is my right hon. Friend able to give us any idea whether the timetable is still robust and when we can expect to see a final report?

Mr Lidington: As my right hon. and learned Friend will know, it is a matter for the independent chair of the inquiry to determine its duration. In my conversations with Sir Brian, he has always been very clear that he does not want this inquiry to drag out; he wants to get justice and a clear outcome for the survivors and the victims, and he will be striving to secure that objective.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): A number of my constituents are affected by this scandal and have waited for decades for answers on how it was allowed to happen. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that Members are updated about where those meetings outside London are held so that we can keep our constituents informed and get the maximum participation?

Mr Lidington: I do have a list, but rather than read it out now perhaps I can write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of it in the Library so that all Members know where those meetings will be taking place.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I suggest to the Minister that one measure that he could take quite quickly is to level up all the payments that those who are infected and affected receive? There is a variation around the United Kingdom at the moment because of devolution, and such a move would go a long way to show good faith to this community.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has always been the most ardent champion of those who have been affected by this scandal, but it is the legal and constitutional position that each part of the United Kingdom is responsible for its own compensation scheme, which reflects the devolution settlement as regards health policy. 1

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend say a little bit more about the role that those who have been affected by this tragedy will have in setting the terms and the scope of the inquiry? I particularly raise this because of the issue of access to treatment, which is something that I have regularly raised and that I think should be explored.

Mr Lidington: That issue is certainly one that I know Sir Brian and the inquiry team want to examine and call evidence on. People who have been directly affected have had opportunities at the preliminary hearings to express their views. More than 1,200 of them have now been appointed as core participants and the forthcoming public meetings will give them a further chance to make sure that their views are indeed heard. Sir Brian is determined that that will be the case.

Cyber-security

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations.

Mr Lidington: Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy, supported by £1.9 billion of investment, sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and assets, to deter our adversaries and to develop the skills and capabilities that we need.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for that response. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a sovereign capability is very important when it comes to cyber-security and that, when Government contracts are awarded, British companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, should be given preference?

Mr Lidington: Where national security interests are at stake, exceptions can be made to the normal rules on public procurement, as my hon. Friend knows. The other thing that we need to do is drive up standards.


among all Government suppliers, large and small, and that is something where we have an active programme of work.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): A Wrexham constituent was concerned that a cyber-security breach at his business was being dealt with from central London and was very disappointed with the responsiveness of the authorities when the breach was reported. Will the Minister do more to ensure that people understand where cyber-security breaches are investigated and improve the system?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to look into the case of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. I encourage all businesses and third sector organisations to look at the materials available on the website of the National Cyber Security Centre, because it includes plenty of evidence about best practice in improving cyber-security for large and small organisations.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Cheltenham is a national centre of cyber-security because of its strength at GCHQ. Does my right hon. Friend agree that T-levels will help us to remain ahead of the curve in ensuring that we have a rich and deep pipeline of talent?

Mr Lidington: T-levels will indeed be an important contribution to improving this country’s skills in cyber-security, and I am pleased that Education Ministers have identified the digital T-level as one of the first to be rolled out in 2020.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): We heard last week that there is an estimated shortage of 50,000 cyber-specialists in the UK—estimated because, unbelievably, the Government have not made any assessment of their own. The Government’s immediate impact fund, designed to quickly increase the number and diversity of cyber-specialists, is helping just 170 people, only 28% of whom are women. Does not this prove that this Government are failing at the first hurdle when it comes to keeping this country safe and bolstering our cyber-resilience?

Mr Lidington: No. The hon. Lady made a point about women cyber-security specialists. It is true that only about a 10th of cyber-professionals anywhere in the world are women. That is why the Government this year launched the CyberFirst Girls competition, which is getting more teenage girls actively interested and involved. That is the way to help develop further cyber-skills in our workforce.

Cyber-specialist Vacancies

4. Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of cyber-specialist vacancies across all Departments.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Departments are responsible for ensuring that adequate staffing levels are met. As part of the national cyber-security strategy, we have newly established a Government security profession unit to support Departments in quantifying and managing their cyber-skills gaps and in building career pathways for specialists.

Conor McGinn: In July, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy criticised the Government for not properly addressing the cyber-security skills and recruitment gap, which it said is of vital importance to Britain’s defence and economy; but today the Minister still cannot tell how many of these specialist role vacancies exist across the Government. When will the Department tasked with upholding cyber-security standards make this tier 1 national security threat a priority?

Mr Lidington: The Committee praised what the Government had done, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, it also said that we needed to do more. I do not dissent from that conclusion. Indeed, the Government made that clear in their response to the Committee’s report. It is important that every Department feels ownership of cyber-security; it is not something seen as for the centre only to worry about. The profession framework, which will be outlined in the spring of next year, will run right across the Government and will outline the job families for specialists and the pay, rewards and career progression that they should be able to expect anywhere in the Government. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The Minister was offering a serious and comprehensive reply to which there was a less than attentive audience, which is perhaps a tad discourteous. Let us have some order in the Chamber so that we can hear Mr Nigel Huddleston.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the UK is actually already a world leader in cyber-security, and will the Government continue to commit, through education and training, to ensure that we continue to be so?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that commitment. I could list a range of programmes that the Government are undertaking with school-age students and tertiary education students to drive up those standards, as well as working with international partners, who look to us for some of the best practice around the world.

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). I thought that the hon. Gentleman wanted to come in on this question. No? It is not obligatory. Speak now or forever hold your peace, man.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am very sorry, Mr Speaker—I could not hear you for the hubbub.

One would think that a cyber-attack against such a lovely country as Scotland would be unthinkable. Does the Minister have any feel for how the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament are getting on with cyber-security?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will not expect me to go into detail, but we do work very seriously and closely with the devolved Governments in both Scotland and Wales and with the Northern Ireland civil service. In my experience, Ministers and senior officials in those Administrations take this challenge very seriously indeed.
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): We have not seen evidence of successful interference in UK democratic processes. However, we are not complacent, as the Prime Minister has said, and we will do what is necessary to protect ourselves and work with our allies to do likewise. The Cabinet Office co-ordinates cross-Government work to protect our democracy and to ensure the public’s confidence in our elections.

Mike Hill: Does the Secretary of State support the work of the Petitions Committee in looking into cyber-bullying?

Chloe Smith: I shall speak to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I am sure that he will be happy to take a look at that.

Joan Ryan: Deepfake videos have the potential to do tremendous harm, as they can easily be fabricated to show candidates making inflammatory statements or, God forbid, simply looking inept. Civic discourse will further degrade and public trust will plummet to new depths. This is the new wave of disinformation and election interference coming from overseas. What are the Government doing to prepare?

Chloe Smith: I thank the right hon. Lady for her very serious question and engagement with this important issue. I share her concern about that as an example of disinformation. The Government are acting to counter disinformation in a number of ways, including following on from our manifesto commitment to ensure that a high-quality news environment can prevail. I look forward to working further with her on this important issue.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Given the activities of the Russians with cyber-attacks, and looking at Florida, what with hanging chads and all the rest of it, will my hon. Friend give the House an assurance that we will not move to an online voting system?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I can give that assurance, which derives from the Conservative party’s manifesto. I can also say that the system we do use of pen-and-paper voting is, by its nature, rather more secure.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What action are the Government taking to seek a range of views on potential measures to secure our voting system from overseas interference?

Chloe Smith: We are doing that in a number of ways. I would be very happy to have a longer conversation with my hon. Friend on this subject. Work goes on across the Government to look at these matters, including with my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and in the Home Office. We, collectively, will ensure that we seek those views.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): In the past week, the police have begun an investigation into whether Arron Banks used foreign money to buy the Brexit referendum. We have also seen Shahmir Sanni victimised for blowing the whistle on electoral crime by Vote Leave. Is it not now time for the Government to admit that the legitimacy of their mandate for the referendum is fatally compromised?

Chloe Smith: I think that the hon. Gentleman draws the wrong conclusion from his argument. The Government will be delivering the outcome of that referendum, on which, I have no doubt, we will hear more from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in just a minute. What I will say, crucially, about the investigation into Arron Banks is that the Government will not comment on an ongoing criminal investigation.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): A lot of the focus on foreign interference, particularly from the Russians, is on technological interference, but there is also a large amount of Russian money swirling around that is finding its way into political parties. What are the Government doing to restrict Russian financial influence on political parties at national and constituency level?

Chloe Smith: We are fully behind the law as it stands, which is that it is not permissible for parties on campaigns to accept foreign donations. We uphold those laws. We will examine recommendations recently made by, for example, the Electoral Commission, about how more may be done.

Mr Speaker: The voice of Plymouth, Moor View, extremely briefly—Johnny Mercer.

Government Hubs: Civil Service Efficiency

6. Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of Government hubs on levels of efficiency in the civil service.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The hubs programme saves money and creates a better place to work by bringing together Government activity on to single sites. We make extensive use of shared spaces, smarter working and workplace design. This encourages productivity as well as reducing vacant space. Indeed, in total, the programme is saving £2.5 billion over 20 years.

Johnny Mercer: The Minister knows what a capable and deeply talented Minister he is, and there are plenty of people like him in Plymouth, Moor View. Does he agree that Plymouth would be an ideal place for one of these Government hubs?

Oliver Dowden: Flattery will get my hon. Friend everywhere, and may I repay it by saying that I know what a powerful advocate he is for the city of Plymouth? He once again makes his case exceptionally
well. While further hub locations cannot be confirmed until commercial negotiations have concluded and Departments have informed staff, future locations are under active consideration.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There is cross-party support for moving Government hubs to Plymouth. What support can the Minister give to local authorities such as Plymouth City Council, which is working to create the buildings and land for these Government hubs to move into?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights the Government’s One Public Estate programme, and the example he cites in Plymouth is just one of many. Overall we expect to release land for 25,000 new homes and create 44,000 jobs by 2020.

Topical Questions

T1. [907586] Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): 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): Yesterday I chaired the Joint Ministerial Committee on EU negotiations, attended by Scottish and Welsh Government Ministers and civil servants from Northern Ireland. This, the eighth such JMC meeting that I have chaired this year, followed the significant progress made in recent months with the devolved Governments in developing UK-wide frameworks to protect the vital internal market of the United Kingdom.

Ross Thomson: From policing to education, health and the environment, the approach of the Scottish National party Government is that control from Edinburgh is best, and when in doubt, centralise. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on what he is doing to ensure that Brexit actually delivers decentralisation from Edinburgh is met?

Mr Lidington: The Smith commission was clear that it is the responsibility of the Scottish Government to work with the Scottish Parliament, civic Scotland and local authorities to ensure that power is devolved from Holyrood to local communities. For our part, we are ready to help the Scottish Government to implement the Smith commission in full and will give them our support if and when they choose to do that.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm without equivocation that the Government will fully comply with yesterday’s resolution that all information provided to the Cabinet will be made available to the House as soon as the Cabinet finishes, if it ever does?

Mr Lidington: I set out the Government’s position yesterday in the debate. We will reflect upon the outcome of the vote yesterday, but at the moment, there is no agreed deal. There is a provisional agreement between negotiators, which has yet to be considered by the UK Cabinet or the 27 member states meeting in Council.

Topical Questions

T2. [907587] Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): In the centenary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, how do we encourage greater diversity among candidates for public office, such as Amandeep Garcha, a Sikh woman in my constituency?

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is fantastic to see such wide diversity of candidates in Walsall. I remind the House that the Government Equalities Office is providing financial assistance for all MPs, to encourage female constituents to come here on 21 November, and I hope more colleagues will take up that opportunity.

T5. [907590] John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): In addition to the register of lobbyists, in the interests of transparency, shouldn’t all think-tanks be obliged to publish their funding sources?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): We believe that the legislation is working well, but we would be happy to look into any specific further points that the hon. Gentleman would like to make.

T3. [907588] Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government Equalities Office funding is in Education, its staff are in the Home Office and its Ministers are in the Department for International Development. My Select Committee recommended a year ago the wholesale move of the GEO to the Cabinet Office. Does my right hon. Friend agree with that?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend and her Committee did indeed make a powerful case. It has needed a lot of cross-departmental discussion, but I hope that in the very near future, we will be in a position to give her a definitive response.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister. Everyone is present and correct, and it is no bad thing to start Prime Minister’s questions precisely on time.

Prime Minister

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907594] Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 14 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. The Cabinet will meet this afternoon to consider the draft agreement that the negotiating teams have reached in Brussels, and the Cabinet will decide on the next steps in the national interest. I am confident that it takes us significantly closer to delivering on what the British people voted for in the referendum. We will take back control of our borders, our laws and our money and leave the common fisheries policy and the common agricultural policy while protecting jobs, security and the integrity of our United Kingdom. I will come back to the House to update it on the outcome.
Alex Burghart: Yesterday saw the best wage growth figures in a decade and the best employment figures in my lifetime. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that that can only be delivered by the free market economics that unite this side of the House, and not by the bankrupt socialism opposite?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He references yesterday’s figures, which showed more people in work than ever before. They showed the female unemployment rate at a record low and, as he said, the fastest regular wage growth in nearly a decade. However, may I say to my hon. Friend that that is on top of figures last week that showed our economy growing three times faster than the eurozone average, the share of jobs on low hourly pay at a record low and the number of children in workless households at a record low? You only get that through good Conservative management of the economy.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): After two years of bungled negotiations, from what we know of the Government’s deal, it is a failure in its own terms. It does not deliver a Brexit for the whole country, it breaches—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. If necessary, I will say it again and again to Members on both sides of the House: voices must be heard. I happen to know that there are visitors from overseas in the Gallery. Let us try to impress them not merely with our liveliness, but with our courtesy.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Government’s deal breaches the Prime Minister’s own red lines and does not deliver a strong economic deal that supports jobs and industry, and we know that they have not prepared seriously for no deal. Does the Prime Minister still intend to put a false choice to Parliament between her botched deal and no deal?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is wrong in the description that he has set out. Time and time again, he has stood up in this House and complained and said, “The Government are not making progress. The Government are not anywhere close to a deal.” Now that we are making progress and are close to a deal, he is complaining about that. That clearly shows that he and the Labour party have only one intention, which is to frustrate Brexit and betray the vote of the British people.

Jeremy Corbyn: After the utter shambles of the last two years of negotiations, the Prime Minister should look to herself in this. She has not managed to convince quite a lot of the Members who are standing behind her. The rail Minister resigned last week, saying:

“To present the nation with a choice between two deeply unattractive outcomes, vassalage and chaos, is a failure of British statecraft on a scale unseen since the Suez crisis”— and that from a Tory MP. Last night, the EU’s lead Brexit negotiator reportedly told the 27 European ambassadors that the UK “must align their rules but the EU will retain all the controls.” Is that a fair summary of the Prime Minister’s deal?

The Prime Minister: As I have said all along, throughout the negotiations, we are negotiating a good deal for the United Kingdom. We are negotiating a deal that delivers on the vote of the British people; that takes back control of our money, law and borders; and that ensures that we leave the common fisheries policy, we leave the customs union and we leave the common agricultural policy, but we protect jobs, we protect security and we protect the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Corbyn: Under the Prime Minister’s deal, we are going to spend years with less say over our laws or how our money is spent. The International Trade Secretary said last week that the decision to withdraw from any backstop agreement could not be contracted to somebody else. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether under her deal, it will be the sovereign right of the UK Parliament to unilaterally withdraw from any backstop?

The Prime Minister: There needs to be a backstop as an insurance policy, but neither side actually wants us to be in that backstop, because we want to bring the future relationship into place at the end of December 2020. I am aware of the concerns that we do not want to be in a position where the European Union would find it comfortable to keep the United Kingdom in the backstop permanently, and that is why any backstop has to be temporary.

Jeremy Corbyn: I think that that non-answer has confirmed that Parliament will not have that sovereign right. The International Trade Secretary breezily declared that he would have 40 trade deals ready to be signed the second after midnight when we leave the EU. With four months to go, can the Prime Minister tell us exactly how many of those 40 deals have been negotiated?

The Prime Minister: We are doing two things. First, we are negotiating to ensure that we maintain the trade deals that currently exist with the European Union when we leave—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not acceptable for Members to shout at the Prime Minister when she is answering questions. We have been talking recently in this Chamber about respect and good behaviour. On both sides, the person who has the floor must be heard, and that is the end of the matter.

The Prime Minister: We have been negotiating on two fronts. We are negotiating on the continuity agreements, which ensure that the trade deals that we have been party to as a member of the European Union can continue when we leave the European Union, and we have also started discussions with other countries about the trade deals that we can forge across the world once we leave the European Union. If the right hon. Gentleman is interested in trade deals, he really needs to sort out the Labour party’s position on this issue. Originally, the Labour party said that it wanted to do trade deals around the rest of the world. Now, he says that he wants to be in the customs union. That would stop him doing trade deals around the rest of the world. We know what is good for this country: an independent trade policy and trade deals—good trade deals—with Europe and with the rest of the world.
Jeremy Corbyn: The International Trade Secretary is not the only one who does not understand international trade rules, and he is not the only one in the Cabinet who does not understand a few things. The Brexit Secretary said last week:

“I hadn’t quite understood the...extent of this, but...we are particularly reliant on the Dover-Calais crossing”.

When did the Prime Minister become aware of this absolutely shocking revelation about Britain’s trade routes?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman stands here and reads out something that says that we do not know about trade policy, but we do know about trade policy. That is exactly why we are negotiating the continuity agreements, and it is why we will be taking our place as an independent state in the World Trade Organisation.

If he wants to talk about different positions that are being taken, what we are doing is delivering a good deal that will deliver on the vote of the British people. We are delivering Brexit. What have we seen recently from the Labour party? Well, the Labour leader said: “we can’t stop” Brexit, but the shadow Brexit Secretary said that we can stop it. When the right hon. Gentleman stands up, he should make it clear: is it Labour party policy to stop Brexit?

Jeremy Corbyn: Labour respects the result of the referendum. What we do not respect is the shambolic mess the Government have made of negotiations: the mess they created that they cannot now get themselves out of. We will not let them destroy this country’s economy or the jobs and life chances of so many others.

If the Brexit Secretary is still in office by the time the Cabinet meets this afternoon, could the Prime Minister take him to one side and have a quiet word with him? Will she tell him that 10,000 lorries arrive at Dover every day, handling 17% of the country’s entire trade in goods, estimated to be worth £122 billion last year? This woeful ignorance by a person in high office is disturbing to so many people.

This Government spent two years negotiating a bad deal that will leave the country in an indefinite halfway house without a real say, yet they think they can impose a false choice on Parliament between a half-baked deal and no deal, when a sensible alternative plan could bring together—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must calm themselves. I have often advised taking some sort of soothing medicament. People may feel better as a consequence. I want to hear what the Prime Minister has to say and I hope the House has the courtesy to want to do so as well.

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that what we have been negotiating is a deal that does deliver on the vote of the British people. In the list I set out earlier, I left out one of the things that the British people are very keen to see from this deal, which is an end to free movement. We will ensure that we deliver on that, as well as the other elements I set out. What we are doing is a deal that delivers on that vote, and in doing so protects jobs, protects the integrity of our United Kingdom and protects the security of people in this country.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Scottish National party, with the leaders of other Opposition parties, has written to the Prime Minister, urging her to drop plans to prevent a truly meaningful vote on the Brexit deal. Shamefully, it seems that the Government are seeking to prevent Opposition amendments to the deal, effectively gagging the sovereignty of Parliament by playing dirty tricks with procedures. I ask the Prime Minister: what is she afraid of? Is her Government so weak that the Brexit deal will not succeed when other solutions are still on the table?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that there will be a meaningful vote in this House. We have also been clear that the motion on the deal will be amendable, but I say to the right hon. Gentleman that if you went out and asked any member of the public, “When the Government bring a deal back from Europe, what do you expect Parliament to vote on?”, I think they would expect Parliament to vote on the deal.

Ian Blackford: We expect Parliament to take its responsibilities, which are to hold the Government to account and amend the deal. This Prime Minister is hamstrung, divided, desperate and looking defeated. In a total panic, the Prime Minister has been reduced to playing political games rather than playing fair. This is not a game. The SNP will never, ever gamble with Scotland’s future. There is only one lifeline left: to
The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman stands up and says that the SNP will not gamble with Scotland's future. I say to him that the SNP gambles with Scotland's future every time it stands up and talks about independence.

Q5. [907598] Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Figures released yesterday show that for the first time ever, more than half of disabled people are now in work, including many military veterans, so will the Prime Minister join me in thanking those employers who have signed up to the Disability Confident scheme, which has allowed such great strides to be made in this area?

The Prime Minister: First of all, it is very good news to see more disabled people getting into the workplace, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the Disability Confident scheme. I praise the work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who created and has personally championed the scheme since it started back in 2013. As my hon. Friend obviously knows, it works directly with employers and aims to challenge the perceptions of what it means to employ a disabled person. We will continue to ensure that we are making every possible effort to make sure that more disabled people who want to be in the workplace are able to take their place in it.

Q6. [907599] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): In 2017, Ministers committed to providing visualisations of the rolling stock depot and viaducts proposed in my constituency by HS2 Ltd. After a whole year of delaying, HS2 Ltd is now refusing to deliver on this commitment. After a whole year of delaying, will the Prime Minister join me in thanking those employers who have signed up to the Disability Confident scheme, which has allowed such great strides to be made in this area?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, what we are negotiating is a deal that will deliver on the vote, that will actually ensure—under the proposals that we put forward in the summer—that we are able to see that frictionless trade across borders and a free trade area with the European Union, and that gives Parliament a lock on those rules.

Q7. [907601] Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Reductions in business rates will help thousands of small and medium-sized shops, restaurants and pubs in our town centres. Will the Prime Minister commit to continuing to work for fundamental reform of local business taxation so that local shops and businesses of all sorts can compete fairly with the online giants?

The Prime Minister: Obviously we have seen a change to the post office network across the United Kingdom—it has happened as people's pattern of behaviour in relation to these matters has changed—but I am sure the Post Office is making decisions that it believes are right for local communities and to ensure that services are there where they are needed.

Q8. [907602] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The brutal murder of a mother in my constituency, shot in the back with a crossbow in front of her family just four weeks before she was due to give birth to her baby, has shocked people up and down the country to the core. I know I speak for every Member in expressing our deepest condolences to the family and our best wishes to the baby for a speedy recovery. Given that weapons such as the crossbow used to kill my constituent are readily available for sale online, can I urge the Prime Minister to look urgently and seriously at expanding the ambit of the Offensive Weapons Bill so that we can toughen up the scope of the laws governing the sale, possession and use of these deadly weapons?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a terrible and tragic case in his constituency, and, as he says, the thoughts of the whole House will be with the victim's family and friends. Our deepest condolences go to campaign on this issue on her constituents' behalf. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is aware of this issue. He is urgently looking into it, and I encourage my hon. Friend to continue to engage with him on this matter to ensure that her constituents get what they were promised.
to them following this terrible attack. Crossbows are subject to strict controls, but we keep the legislation under review and will consider the risk that such weapons pose to public safety and whether further measures are needed, and we will of course look at that in the context of the legislation we are bringing before the House.

Q13. [907607] Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while the Government have invested millions in our railways, when my constituents are still suffering from chronic overcrowding on carriages it is incumbent on Network Rail to deliver projects on time, so that new rolling stock can be quickly put in place to alleviate the overcrowding?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend highlights the fact that we are delivering the biggest rail investment programme since the Victorian era. He says we are spending millions on our railways, but actually we will be spending nearly £48 billion on modernising and renewing our railways, which will deliver better journeys and fewer disruptions. He is right, however, that it is absolutely vital that Network Rail delivers its projects on time. I am told that Northern’s new rolling stock is currently planned to serve lines from June and July next year, but I know he has been campaigning excellently on this issue, and I encourage him to continue to do so.

Q9. [907603] Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I am privileged to have two award-wining sixth-form colleges in my constituency, but with no increase in funding since 2010, Winstanley College has cut German A-level from the syllabus and St John Rigby has drastically reduced pastoral support. Does the Prime Minister believe, like the Chancellor, that these are just little extras, or does she agree that it is time to raise the funding rate?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady looks at what we have been doing for education funding overall, she will see that we have been putting extra money into funding—[Interruption]—Members say, “Not in FE”—but we have invested nearly £7 billion in further education this year to ensure that there is an educational training place for every 16 to 19-year-old who wants one. We are also transforming technical education through T-levels, which will see that we have been putting extra money into skills for every 16 to 19-year-old who wants one. Winstanley College is truly inspiring.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): We are currently in the middle of a swirl of rumours about the proposed deal with the European Union, and a torrent of criticism from all the Government’s most ferocious critics. One of the rumours is that if the Cabinet agrees to the deal this afternoon, the Government propose to publish a White Paper setting out all the details later today.

Will the Prime Minister give an assurance that, if and when this deal is published, a statement will be made to this House of Commons when it is produced? It is this Parliament that will have to decide now what to do next, and we do not want Parliament to be consulted only after another 24 hours of rumours and criticism. We want to re-establish parliamentary sovereignty, and I wish the Prime Minister well in obtaining a majority for some course of action in future that is in the national interest.

The Prime Minister: There are, in fact, two stages—potentially two stages—in this process. As I said earlier today, the Cabinet will be looking at the draft agreements that the negotiating teams have produced, and will consider and determine what the next steps should be in the national interest, as my right hon. and learned Friend requests us to do. I can assure him that we will be looking at this in the national interest.

As I said, I will return to the House to explain the outcome of that, but I should also say to my right hon. and learned Friend that there is then the issue of ensuring—as we will—when a final deal is agreed with the European Union, that proper analysis is available to Members before the meaningful vote takes place, and that briefings on the details of the proposals that are laid are available to Members, so that, as he has said, Members are able to make their decision in the light of an understanding of the details of the deal that has been agreed.

Q14. [907608] Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to my constituent Dennis Brock, who will celebrate his 100th birthday next week? Uniquely, he has been ringing the bells at St Mary’s church in Sunbury-on-Thames for 87 years, and we confidently believe that he is the oldest bell ringer in the world.

Mr Speaker: I call the Prime Minister. [Interruption.] Order. I want to hear about the bell ringing situation.

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased first to wish Dennis Brock a very happy 100th birthday, and secondly to pay tribute to him for his 87 years of bellringing. As my hon. Friend has said, that is a considerable and significant record, and I think the support he has given, the work he has done and his commitment to St Mary’s in Sunbury-on-Thames are truly inspiring.

Q10. [907604] Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): More than a third of the children in my great city are currently living in poverty. Our local food banks have seen a 42% increase in demand since universal credit was imposed on us in June. Most referrals come from the Tory-led city council, which is refusing to give them a penny. Is that compassionate conservatism?
on the surge in violent crime. We cannot continue to see the levels of violence which resulted in five fatal stabbing in six days in London just two weeks ago. How many times does the Prime Minister need to be told about the dire consequences before she gives our frontline policing the resources it so clearly needs?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that we are all concerned across this House about the attacks that have taken place in recent days in London. We are concerned about knife crime and the serious violence we have seen. We heard earlier from the right hon. Lady’s colleague, the hon. Member for Ilford North (West Streeting), about the use of a crossbow to attack, and, sadly, kill an individual. The right hon. Lady talks about police funding. We have protected police funding overall since 2015. We are putting more money into the police. We are making more money available—we have announced that. But this is also about ensuring that the police and the criminal justice system have the powers they need to deal with knife crime, and if she is concerned about knife crime I suggest that she asks her right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition why he voted against increasing the powers to deal with knife crime.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I say to my right hon. Friend that I am not going to be asking about Brexit—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] For now. I was enormously proud of my Government for agreeing to lower the stake on fixed odds betting terminals to £2 because they have caused endless harm and terrible damage to families. It was the right decision. Since then there has been a hiatus about the date on which this will start. Is it a reality that now we have put down an amendment the Government will accede and we will get this process started on 1 April next year?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has campaigned on that issue with a passion because, as he says, the question of the maximum stake for FOBTs has an impact on vulnerable people as well as their families and loved ones. I recognise the strength of feeling on the issue. I know that gambling addiction can devastate lives, so our priority is making sure that this change delivers the results we all want to see. We are listening to concerns being raised by colleagues and, if he will have a little patience, I can tell him that the Culture Secretary will set out further details later today.

Q12. [907606] Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies has indicated that, by 2021-22, child poverty will have risen from 30% to 37%. When a Government treat their people like that, they are not worth their salt, but I suppose this Government never had any salt anyway. Should not the Government be ashamed of themselves for allowing that situation to develop for children?

The Prime Minister: What we have seen under this Government is absolute poverty reducing to a record low. We have also seen, as I referenced earlier, a significant reduction in the number of children in workless households. When we look at the figures, we see that actually three quarters of children are taken out of poverty when their household moves from being a workless household to a household with work, which is why the changes that we are making, to ensure that our benefit and welfare system encourages people into work and makes sure that work pays, are the right changes.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Former New Zealand high commissioner and experienced trade negotiator Sir Lockwood Smith told our International Trade Committee:

“If you remain bound into the EU regulatory system you will not be able to have a significant global trade strategy”.

Will my right hon. Friend advise whether this might be one of the prices to pay for her Brexit deal?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not one of the prices paid that my hon. Friend refers to. We will still be able to strike those deals around the rest of the world. I am pleased to say that not only are a number of countries expressing an interest in that, but, as we have seen and as I saw two or three weeks ago, countries including Japan, Vietnam and Australia are keen that we should talk to them about joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-pacific partnership. We specifically looked at our ability under the proposals we put forward to strike those trade deals around the world, and we will have an independent trade policy—we will be able to strike those trade deals.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is no secret that the Labour Welsh Government have been somewhat lacklustre in what they demand from the British Government on Brexit, so I will speak on behalf of Wales. When will the devolved Parliaments be given the opportunity to see the withdrawal agreement texts and to see for themselves the devastating effect that leaving the European frameworks will have on each of the devolved nations?

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated in response to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), we will ensure that information is available to Members of this House on the withdrawal agreement and on the future relationship that is agreed with the European Union. We will ensure that briefings are available, that documents are available and that the analysis that the Government have previously committed themselves to is available, so that, when Members of this House come to the meaningful vote on a deal, they will be able to have that information and to cast their vote against the background of that information.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Further to the point raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), will my right hon. Friend endeavour as soon as practicable following the Cabinet meeting this afternoon to make available to all Members the details of the draft agreement, so that those of us who wish to do so can comment on them on the basis of fact, rather than on the basis of ill-informed speculation?

The Prime Minister: Obviously the Cabinet is meeting to determine what the next steps are in relation to this issue. If this is a deal that is then taken forward for further debate and negotiation with the European Union, I believe it is the intention to ensure that the details of that deal are made public so that people can look at the facts.
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): If what is being reported is correct, the Prime Minister is set on ploughing through with a Brexit deal that will be bad for our economy, bad for our jobs and bad for a hard-working people up and down this country. If she honestly believes that she commands the will of the people, will she put her Brexit deal to the people, either through a general election or, failing that, through a new referendum?

The Prime Minister: First, we are negotiating a deal that will be good for the economy of the United Kingdom. It will be a deal that will ensure that we continue to have a good trading relationship with the European Union but also that we are able to strike independent trade deals around the rest of the world. On the issue of the second referendum, there was a referendum in this country in 2016 in which we asked the British people whether they wanted to remain in the European Union or to leave it. They voted to leave, and that is what this Government will deliver.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): This morning, an incredibly well-attended annual general meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on thalidomide took place. May I invite my right hon. Friend—and indeed the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—to lend their support, to talk to the German Government to persuade them of the merit of social justice, and to deliver a lasting solution for those who have suffered for too long?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has been championing this cause. It is significant that, so many years after thalidomide caused the problems and difficulties for people that it did, he and others like him are still having to campaign on this particular cause. I will certainly look into, and ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to look into, what he says about the possibility of speaking to the German Government on this issue.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Asia Bibi spent eight years on death row in Pakistan for a crime that she did not commit. Since the High Court quashed her conviction, she has been in hiding. Weekend reports suggested that she had applied for asylum in Britain. Does the Prime Minister agree that Britain should be a beacon for human rights and for those fleeing religious persecution?

The Prime Minister: Our primary concern is for the safety and security of Asia Bibi and her family, and we want to see a swift resolution of the situation. Obviously there is an issue for the Government and courts in Pakistan, and the Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has publicly supported the Supreme Court and promised to uphold the rule of law while providing continued protection for Asia Bibi. A number of countries are in discussion about providing a safe destination for her once the legal process is complete—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): But is she welcome here?

The Prime Minister: I am sure the House will understand, given the sensitivity of this case, that it would not be right to comment on the details of those proposals at this stage, but we remain in close contact with international partners to ensure Asia Bibi’s long-term safety and interests.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Prime Minister confirmed earlier that we will indeed be leaving the common fisheries policy, which is welcome, but she will be aware that there is still considerable concern within the industry. Can she give an absolute assurance that it will be for the UK, and the UK alone, to determine who fishes in our national waters after a deal is signed?

The Prime Minister: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will become an independent coastal state, and it will be the UK negotiating on the UK’s behalf in terms of access to UK waters.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that, back in 1965, there was a neighbourhood agreement between Northern Ireland and the Republic that each could fish in the other’s six-mile waters. Two years ago, the Irish Republic reneged on that. We, of course, taking the moral high ground, did not renge, so now all the Irish fishermen can come into Northern Ireland waters, but Northern Ireland fishermen cannot go into Republic waters. Will the Prime Minister try to speak up sometimes for Northern Ireland fishermen and not feel that she always has to support the Irish Government?

The Prime Minister: Consistently throughout these negotiations one of the issues that I have had at the forefront of my thinking has been the people of Northern Ireland. The hon. Lady raises a specific issue about fishing, and I am happy to look at the specific issue of the six-mile waters. We will become an independent coastal state, as I have just said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). We will ensure that it is the United Kingdom that is negotiating on behalf of the UK for access to UK fishing waters, but the people of Northern Ireland are at the forefront of our concerns in relation to the deal that we are negotiating.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister is to be commended for initiating her race disparity audit, which showed, among other facts, that Traveller children have the worst educational, health and employment outcomes of almost any group. Given the acute distress also caused to many settled residents by policy in this area, and given the support yesterday for my ten-minute rule Bill calling for a review of this area across the House, will the Prime Minister please appoint a senior Cabinet Minister to undertake a complete review of this area so that we can have better outcomes for all our constituents?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an issue that I know is of concern for many across the UK in terms of what they see in their constituencies. As he said, there is also a concern about the impact on the educational attainment of Traveller children. As he will know, we published a consultation on tackling unauthorised encampments in April, and we will respond on that in due course. We are committed to strengthening local councils’ and the police’s powers to address these problems and to ensure fair play. We take this issue very seriously, and we are carefully considering the response that we can give to the consultation.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Can the Prime Minister confirm that her deal will leave the United Kingdom a rule taker, not a rule maker—in other words, a vassal state? Is not the best way to get herself out of the mess that she and her colleagues have caused to allow the people a vote in a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I think I have given the right hon. Gentleman the same answer to this question on a number of occasions. This Parliament gave the British people the vote on whether or not to stay in the European Union in 2016. The British people voted—they voted to leave—and it is this Government who will deliver on that vote and deliver Brexit.
Points of Order

12.43 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the question from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), can you advise Members whether you have had any indication about when a statement will be made on the apparent withdrawal agreement with the EU? We hear rumours that a statement may be made tomorrow, but many hon. Members may already have commitments. I understand that the House needs to mark the 70th birthday of the Prince of Wales today, but in the remaining six hours we could surely discuss the most important issue facing this country in a generation.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The candid answer is that I had been given to understand that there would be a statement on this matter, or of likelihood, tomorrow. I wish to respond to her, what I would say is that the Chair would be perfectly amenable to a statement before then. That is not, however, a judgment for me; it is properly a judgment for the Government. I understand what she says about people having commitments tomorrow—

[Interruption.] /Order. But it does seem to me a reasonable point to make in response that, if Members consider this to be a supremely important matter, they can potentially rearrange their diaries in order to be present. I am always in favour, as she knows, of statements sooner rather than later but, if I may so, I do not think we should have a great row about whether a statement is made today or tomorrow.

What I would like to say to Members is that when there is a statement to this House, in conformity with the practice I have applied for nearly nine and a half years from this Chair, there will be a full opportunity for Members in all parts of the House, and potentially expressing or representing all sorts of different points of view, to be heard. That is the way it has always been and, as far as I am concerned, that is the way it will continue to be.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Although you say you have no role in this, do you not agree that, until very recently, it has always been the constitutional convention in this House that, when a Government announce a major policy, they do so, first of all, by a statement here in the House of Commons, usually simultaneously with the publication of a White Paper? With great respect, it is not just a question of Members having other commitments, or convenience. We are slipping into this practice where Government policies are leaked in advance, then the Government brief the press and a great national debate breaks out, and then Parliament finally gets the opportunity to discuss it a day later. If you have any opportunity to discuss with the usual channels what the proper role of Parliament should be, I think your assistance would be greatly appreciated.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for that point of order. I am bound to say to him that my attitude has been that we have Cabinet government in this country. The policy is the policy of the Government only when it has been approved by the Cabinet. /Interruption./ Members can take their own view on whether I am right or wrong, but I am simply seeking to explain to the Father of the House that the premise on which I am working is that it will be Government policy if and only if, and only when, it has been approved by the Cabinet.

It therefore does not seem to me to be unreasonable, if the Cabinet is meeting this afternoon, for the House to hear a statement tomorrow. However, if it is possible for that statement to be made today, in the sense that a policy has been agreed, I am at the service of the House and I am in favour of a statement being made at the earliest possible opportunity. That point will have been heard on the Treasury Bench, and I am grateful to the Father of the House for his assistance in this important matter.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me on the courses of action that are available to raise this issue? The Chief Minister of Gibraltar has, I understand, been briefed by the Minister for Europe and the Americas, and I understand that no such courtesy has been afforded to the Scottish Government. How do I bring a Minister here so I can ask why the Scottish Government have not yet seen the final deal but Gibraltar has?

Mr Speaker: There may be an opportunity for an exchange later in the day. The Minister for the Cabinet Office is perched as though he is about to leap to his feet with alacrity to respond, through me, to the hon. Lady.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. If it will help the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), I had a very constructive meeting with the First Ministers of both Wales and Scotland last Friday morning, when we discussed the progress of negotiations up to that point. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will, when the Cabinet has taken a view and come to a decision about what has been agreed provisionally between negotiators, talk directly to the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, because it is quite right that they should be fully briefed on what the Cabinet has decided.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. I hope it is not vexatious; I hope it is not a point of frustration.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would not be frustrated at all, Mr Speaker, especially not in here.

One year has now passed since my constituent Jagtar Singh Johal was arrested in India. Neither evidence nor a witness has been placed before a court of law, and a report of torture has been placed before the United Nations rapporteur on torture. I have raised the issue with you previously, seeking ministerial responses to letters and to requests for meetings with the Foreign Secretary. A commitment was given, the last time I raised this, on the Floor of the House. Can you assure me, while I am standing here and my constituent’s brother is in the Under Gallery, that the new Foreign Secretary could make that commitment, either through a statement to the House or through my writing to the Minister directly, yet again, as I have done already?
Mr Speaker: I am sorry that it is necessary for the hon. Gentleman repeatedly to write to Ministers on this matter, and it is obvious that he is dissatisfied with the response or lack thereof. My only advice to the hon. Gentleman is the advice I usually give to Members irritated in these circumstances, which is persist—persist man, persist. He is a dexterous and adroit parliamentary performer, and he will know the instruments available to him. If he believes, as I rather imagine he does, that the matter is urgent, he may wish to deploy a procedure that might give him a chance of raising the matter with a Minister in the Chamber on that basis.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House may well not have seen that another issue has just broken in the news, which is that more than 48,000 women have not received correspondence regarding cervical screening appointments and have gone without correspondence regarding cervical screening results, 500 of which, apparently, were abnormal results. This is the latest failing of Capita, and Capita should lose this contract and the service should come in-house. The previous Health and Social Care Secretary, who is now the Foreign Secretary, would routinely update the House on these types of matter. Has the current Health and Social Care Secretary given you an indication that he is going to come to this House to update us, so that we can ask questions on behalf of our constituents?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is no, but I would very much expect that the House will be addressed on this matter very soon, certainly within a matter of days. Like the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), the hon. Gentleman is well versed in the instruments available to him. If he does not get a statement, or in lieu of a statement and as a reserve order, Mr Speaker. Given the very clear decision of the House yesterday in relation to the publication of legal advice and the reported very worrying comments of the Attorney General in recent hours, can you ensure that the advice will be brought forward in a timely way and should certainly not be very long delayed after the publication of any White Paper or any statement? These things should happen almost simultaneously if we are to have a proper and informed debate on the statement or whatever comes forward. The House spoke clearly yesterday and that must be acceded to by the Government.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I agree entirely with the right hon. Gentleman and I could not have put it better myself. I hope that that message has been heard clearly by those on the Treasury Bench. What happened yesterday was not an expression of opinion by the House of Commons; it was an expression of the will of this House. That will must be respected by the Executive branch—it is as simple and incontestable as that.

If there are no further points of order, perhaps we can now proceed.

Clerk of the House

12.53 pm

Mr Speaker: I have received a letter from the Clerk of the House and, as is customary in such circumstances, I propose to read it to the House. The letter is as follows: “Dear Mr Speaker,

I write to inform you that I have indicated to Her Majesty The Queen that I intend to surrender my Patent as Clerk of the House on 1 March next year. I shall then have served the House for over 43 years, for the last 16 years at the Table. In March 2019 it will be 4 years since I was appointed as the 50th Clerk of the House. You have long known of my plans to retire in the first quarter of 2019, and I am grateful to you and the House of Commons Commission for agreeing in July of this year to all the detailed arrangements for selecting my successor, which can now be activated.

It has been a turbulent 4 years, covering three governments, two general elections and two referendums; the murders of Jo Cox MP and PC Palmer; threats to our physical and cyber-security; and the eb and flow of launching Restoration and Renewal. It has seen the establishment of the new Parliamentary Digital Service and the Parliamentary Security Department; as well as new governance structures. And it hardly needs saying there may be more turbulence over the next few weeks and months.

The last 12 months have also of course seen the surfacing in various ways of the complex issue of bullying and harassment and sexual misconduct in the parliamentary community. I am confident that we can deal with it if we all acknowledge past failings—as I readily do—and move beyond concerns about process to reach a place where, quite simply, everybody in the community treats everybody else with respect and dignity. And where, if they do not, they are called out and if necessary sanctioned.

It has been a privilege if not always a positive pleasure to do this job and the other 14 jobs I have done here, in all of them sustained by the loyalty and friendship of my colleagues across the House of Commons Service, and in the House of Lords. I could not have been prouder than when I was appointed as the Head of the House of Commons service four years ago. The House of Commons service are a remarkably talented, diverse and dedicated group of public servants and I will miss them.

I will also miss the support and friendship of Members on all sides of the House. I do not think the public appreciate the work of Members, or their staff, as they should; and perhaps they never will.

Members demonstrate the best of public service in so many ways: in scrutiny and debate and inquiry here and in representing their constituents. I have found the House at its best to be a kind and generous place.

I am also glad over the past 4 years to have been able to visit a number of constituency offices around the country and see at first hand the public service provided by Members’ staff. Members and their staff carry out their work in the face of spiteful abuse and threat and vilification. They deserve better.

Finally, I would like to thank you, all the Deputy Speakers with whom I have worked, and the chairs and members of the select committees I have served, for their friendship, collegiality and good humour, especially in times of tension or difficulty.

The ten years since the expenses scandal and the Wright Report have seen the House of Commons come back from a very low place to being as open and vibrant and independent and outward-looking as at any time in modern history. I am proud to have played a small part in that journey. Whatever happens over the next few months the House of Commons will be at the centre of it, and that is how it should be.

I am confident that the House will continue to thrive as the central institution of our parliamentary democracy, celebrating the old while embracing the new, and holding fast to the recognition that parliamentary service is in the truest sense a form of public service.

Yours ever,

David”. All
Hon. Members: Hear, hear. [Applause.]

Mr Speaker: An exceptional occasion justifies an exceptional response.

David, I am extraordinarily grateful to you. You have been an outstanding Clerk of the House. You have given dedicated and brilliant public service. I am grateful to you, and I believe everybody in this place is grateful to you.

Members with experience in this place will know that there is an occasion for tributes to the outgoing Clerk. That occasion is not today, but it will come subsequently, and I feel sure that it will involve a very substantial number of Members wishing to participate and to record both their respect and their appreciation of an exceptional public servant.

BILL PRESENTED

European Union Withdrawal (Evaluation of Effects on Health and Social Care Sectors) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Brendan O'Hara, supported by Neil Gray, Stephen Gethins, Joanna Cherry, Martyn Day, Tommy Sheppard, Caroline Lucas, Liz Saville Roberts, Ben Lake, Christine Jardine, Layla Moran, Tom Brake and Ian Murray presented a Bill to make provision for an independent evaluation of the effects of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union on the health and social care sectors; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 288).

Freehold Properties (Management Charges and Shared Facilities)

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

1.1 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the regulation of fees charged by management companies to freeholders of residential properties; to make provision for self-management of shared facilities by such freeholders; to require management companies to ensure shared facilities are of an adequate standard; and for connected purposes.

A couple of years ago, I had a trickle of complaints about the poor upkeep of new estates and unfair fees being charged to homeowners on them. It then turned into a torrent, and latterly into a flood. Constituents of mine who live at Hazelbank, Burton Woods, Durham Gate and Middridge Vale, and now at Castle Vale and Startforth Park, have all been affected. I am grateful to them for alerting me to what I have now discovered is a national problem. I also wish to thank Cathy Priestley, who is sitting in the Gallery. She has set up the national pressure group the Homeowners Rights Network, fondly known as HorNet. She has been campaigning on behalf of homeowners and really understands the problems.

The first issue is that the public spaces are not made up to a proper standard. One man I met is still living on an unmade road after eight years. Promises of green areas, woodland, play facilities and even street lighting are broken. As it happens, County Durham has miles of unadopted roads of terraced housing that were built by mine owners in the late 19th century. Now, we have property developers with the same exploitative disregard for homeowners. We are building the 21st century blight.

Secondly, fees are high, rising, uncapped and unregulated. One constituent told me that their fee had risen from £60 to £134 in four years. At that rate, in 16 years’ time it will be £3,316 a year. Another constituent faced a 50% rise in one year. On the Middridge Vale estate, the total payments were £27,000—and that was just for grass cutting. There is a total lack of transparency about the way the fees are made up. Management charges usually exceed upkeep costs, with items such as company admin fees, accountancy, dormant account fees and transfers appearing to be plucked from the air. On one small estate, the actual maintenance costs were less than a fifth of the fees charged. On another, the homeowners found a gardener who would do the work for £400, and the agent promptly added a £400 admin fee. Extra sums are charged for installing TV aerials, and residents have been tied to E.ON as their electricity provider. It all looks like just another way for property developers to screw more money out of hard-pressed households. It is really a private new build tax, so the news that Persimmon boss Jeff Fairburn received a £75 million bonus was greeted with outrage.

The third problem is that when challenged by residents about the fees or upkeep, the management companies adopt an ultra-aggressive stance. My constituents have been bullied with threats of High Court action, or even the bailiffs. This is going on throughout the country; we estimate that 1.3 million households are currently affected. The Government’s response to HorNet—that people...
should take up their issues with developers, or that the Government will legislate at some point in the future to give a right of challenge through the first-tier tribunal—is wholly inadequate. Individual citizens cannot challenge multibillion-pound corporations, because the underlying problem is the legal structure, which my Bill would change.

The large property developers, such as Persimmon, Barratt and Taylor Wimpey, are scamming people from the start. Purchasers are offered solicitors who are not truly independent and appear to be contracted by the developers, which the Law Society surely ought to address. Many people feel that they were mis-sold their homes, and this is increasingly looking like another PPI scandal. People are worried that the situation will make it very difficult for them to sell their houses in future, so they have an asset of uncertain value.

The open spaces are initially owned by the property developers, who sell them and the right to manage them on to agents. The same names crop up over and over again: Greenbelt and Gateway. Indeed, one Antony John Dean is the director of 130 such companies. This monopolistic position gives the managing agents the opportunity to mismanage and overcharge with impunity. Some of my constituents have discovered that the land has been put into trusts or covenanted to a void liability and control its use. The residents are powerless to appoint new agents or influence their behaviour.

Unlike leaseholders, who have access to a dedicated ombudsman service, freeholders have no legal recourse in the event of a dispute. Using old law—in particular section 121 of the Law of Property Act 1925—the agents can place charges on the property if residents are late with payments. It is an incredibly one-sided contract. Homeowners do not have the power to ask for justification of costs, but the management company can legally send in bailiffs or threaten repossession of the home if a resident does not pay on time. This is why people are coining the terms “fleecehold” and “fake freehold”. Indeed, there is no point in the Government legislating to give leaseholders the right to buy their freeholds unless they strengthen the legal position of freeholders.

My Bill would tackle the problem. To prevent more people from being caught in this trap in future, developers should be required to make up their public spaces to adoptable standards on a reasonable timescale. For existing homeowners, a different approach is obviously needed. First, the Bill would cap and regulate estate maintenance fees to give people the security of knowing that prices cannot increase indefinitely. Secondly, it would introduce measures to ensure that shared facilities are maintained to an adequate standard, to end the “money for nothing” culture of property companies. Finally, it would make provision for the transfer to genuine self-management, to end the stranglehold of managing agents.

The overwhelmingly positive response that I have had from colleagues across all parties demonstrates that this is a national problem. Currently, we estimate that 1.3 million households are affected; given the Government’s ambitions for house building, many more soon will be. We need to grip this problem and act fast.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Helen Goodman, Faisal Rashid, Justin Madders, Louise Haigh, Ian Austin, Sir Peter Bottomley, Ian Mearns, Mr William Wragg, Fiona Bruce, Catherine McKinnell, Jim Fitzpatrick and Mary Glindon present the Bill.

Helen Goodman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 289).

Mr Speaker: I had been given to understand that there would be some points of order now, but I do not see any. If anybody wants to raise a point of order, he or she can do so. [Interruption.] I was told less than five minutes ago that there would be some points of order, but there are not, and that is absolutely fine. I am simply responding to what I have been told.
70th Birthday of the Prince of Wales

1.10 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty on the seventieth birthday of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, to assure Her Majesty of the great pleasure felt by this House on so joyful an occasion.

That the said Address be presented to Her Majesty by such Members of the House as are of Her Majesty’s most Honourable Privy Council or of Her Majesty’s Household.

That a Message be sent to His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, to offer His Royal Highness the warmest good wishes of the House upon the occasion of his seventieth birthday, expressing the gratitude of the nation for his lifetime of service to the country and the Commonwealth and praying that His Royal Highness may long continue in health and happiness.

That Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister, Andrea Leadsom, Jeremy Corbyn and Ian Blackford do wait upon His Royal Highness with the said Message.

Over the past 70 years, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has played many roles in our national life. As a sailor, he earned a mine-sweeper in the Royal Navy. As an airman, he gained his wings with the RAF. As the founder of the Prince’s Trust, he has worked tirelessly to help more than 900,000 vulnerable young people turn their lives around. As a farmer and entrepreneur he created and built a successful business, one that turns over more than £200 million a year and whose profits help support charitable causes. And, as heir to the throne, he has unstintingly supported Her Majesty the Queen for many decades, working with and representing our monarch and our country both at home and abroad. Binding those diverse strands together is a common thread; one that is encapsulated in the motto that, for hundreds of years, has adorned the Prince of Wales feathers: “Ich Dien”—I serve.

Throughout the Prince of Wales’s life, his commitment to public service has been total. That is true of his royal duties, which see him performing well over 600 official engagements every year. It is true of his work with the Commonwealth, in which he has played an active role for many years. The esteem in which he is held by the Commonwealth was made clear at the Heads of Government meeting earlier this year, when the member states unanimously chose to name him as the next head of the organisation—another role in which I am sure he will excel. It is also true of his wider work. First and foremost there is the Prince’s Trust and his other charities, of course. There is also his involvement with groups as diverse as the British Red Cross and the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, which has helped to regenerate the historic centre of Kabul—just two of the more than 400 organisations that he serves as patron.

Yet this public work only begins to scratch the surface of the Prince of Wales’s life. He is also an author, an artist, and a sportsman. As a student, when he became the first heir apparent to graduate from university, he also displayed an aptitude for comic acting. I am told that his impression of Peter Sellers’ Bluebottle, from his beloved “Goon Show”, is particularly on point. He is, I believe, the only public figure to have appeared on both “Gardener’s Question Time” and “MasterChef Australia”, not to mention once delivering the weather forecast on BBC Scotland. He has a great and wide-ranging love of music. Indeed, he remarked in 1974:

“If I hear rhythmic music, I just want to get up and dance.”

That is something, I am sure, that many of us empathise with.

The more one looks at the prince’s life, the more one sees that a man who has spent 70 years defying expectations and refusing to be categorised. It is an approach that has seen him delivering a speech in Pidgin to an audience in Nigeria only last week, during an official Commonwealth tour; encouraging his sons to spend childhood holidays collecting litter from the local countryside; and choosing to celebrate his 40th birthday with 1,500 young people from deprived backgrounds. It is an approach that often shows him to be a man ahead of his time.

In one of his first major public speeches, in 1970, the Prince of Wales warned of the “horrifying effect of pollution in all its forms", with particular criticism reserved for the “mountains of refuse" created by plastic bottles that are used once and discarded. Half a century later, the UK and the world have woken up to the plastic threat and are taking action to tackle it.

In his debating debut at the Cambridge Union, the young prince spoke about the potentially dehumanising effects of technology in the workplace—an issue that is now at the forefront of many minds as we consider the impact of artificial intelligence. The same foresight can be seen in his long-held views on urban regeneration, on sustainable agriculture, on inter-faith dialogue and on improving the quality of the built environment, each of them issues that, after being raised by the prince, have moved to the mainstream, becoming widely embraced and accepted.

We could not pay tribute to His Royal Highness without mentioning perhaps his most important role of all—that of father and, more recently, of grandfather. Regardless of background or resources, raising children is never an easy task. It is made all the more difficult when they suffer a devastating loss at an early age. So today, as Prince William and Prince Harry make their own way in the world and begin to raise their own families, I know that I speak for all of us when I say that they are a true credit to their father. We as a nation are immensely proud of them, and I am sure that he is too.

On behalf of the whole House, it gives me great pleasure to wish His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales a very happy 70th birthday, and to offer him our very best wishes for the years ahead as he continues his remarkable record of service to his Queen, his country and his Commonwealth.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to support this motion. Many people across the country will be wishing His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales a very happy 70th birthday. It might come as a surprise to many that His Royal Highness and I have something in common—we are both, it seems, leaving it late when it comes to career progression, although he has had a lifetime preparing for this role.

People in this country may have varying opinions about the institution of monarchy, but no one would say that being the heir to the throne of the UK as well as of 15 other nations is an easy job. His Royal Highness...
has shown a commitment to public service and charity and a passion for several notable causes throughout his life.

People say the past is a different place, and the Britain of 1948—the year the prince was born—was a very different place from the Britain of today. In many ways, it was a time of great optimism. It was the year of the universal declaration of human rights, which aims to give universal rights to everybody across the globe no matter who they are. It was, of course, also the year of the founding of the national health service, which is celebrating its 70th birthday this year. It was also a time of hardship, with the country emerging from the horrors and destruction of world war two. We had beaten fascism, but there was little rest to be had as work had to be done to rebuild Europe in the aftermath of that war.

In those days, our country was considerably poorer, both economically and culturally, not having benefited from the richness of multiculturalism that we enjoy today. It was, of course, the year that the Empire Windrush docked in Tilbury, bringing people from Jamaica and the Caribbean to start new lives here in Britain. Many of them and their children and grandchildren now form an integral part of our society, our country and, indeed, this House.

In 1948, British towns and cities were still scarred with bomb craters, rationing for food and clothing remained in place and censorship was enforced on stage and in our theatres. Prince Charles might have regretted the ending of censorship when, at a televised awards ceremony in 1994, the late great Spike Milligan, who was a good friend of the prince, infamously described him in words that I am sure, even today, Mr Speaker, you would not permit me to use in the House. Spike later faxed the prince to apologise, asking: “I suppose a knighthood is out of the question now?” Obviously, Prince Charles accepted the apology, because Spike did indeed later get an honorary knighthood.

Throughout his life, the Prince of Wales has committed himself to public service, as the Prime Minister said. The Prince’s Charities, supported by the Prince’s Charities Foundation, comprises 19 different charities. The charities focus on issues from the arts to the natural world. They include initiatives such as the British Asian Trust, which celebrates our country’s openness to the world and aims to help lift people out of poverty both in south Asia and here in Britain.

The trust picks up on another of the prince’s own passions, which I have regularly talked to him about: giving support to young people from all backgrounds and every part of the country. The trust has done unrivalled work in opening up opportunities for young people, helping them to find employment, education and training, unlocking their talents so they are able to lead the lives that they want and deserve to lead.

One example of the work the trust does is at Dumfries House in Ayrshire, where it supports courses for young people, teaching practical crafts such as stone masonry and carpentry. The work done there reminds me of a quote by the Victorian socialist and promoter of such skilled crafts, William Morris, whose work I believe the prince appreciates. Morris wrote:

“I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.”

Instead of writing people off, as some people are often too willing to do, the Prince’s Trust, its supporters and its hard-working staff have endeavoured to make a real difference to young people’s lives and to provide the support and encouragement that, for whatever reason, had previously been absent from their lives.

The prince has also shown a consistent commitment to our often ignored natural world. As our climate and soils are being destroyed before our very eyes, the prince’s interest in the natural environment has not gone unnoticed. My friend the late great MP Michael Meacher once recalled that when he was an Environment Minister, he and His Royal Highness would “consort” to persuade the Government to do more on green energy. Asked by the press if there was a constitutional problem with a member of the royal family advocating a political opinion, Michael—a committed republican—replied:

“Maybe he was pushing it a bit. I was delighted, of course.”

It is a vital principle that the royal family remains above politics, but Prince Charles is an ambassador for a country that does take seriously the scientific realities of climate destruction. I do wonder whether, if there is anyone on this planet who might be able to get that message through to the President of the United States, it could well be Prince Charles. Indeed, His Royal Highness may be a Knight of the Garter and a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath, but few accolades can compare to when a brand new species native to Ecuador was discovered in 2012 and named the Prince Charles stream tree frog.

His Royal Highness’s horticultural exploits are well known. As a keen gardener and allotment holder, I can sympathise with the prince’s desire to talk to plants. I have certainly found them better listeners than many Members of this House over the years. It is traditional to give gifts, especially when one reaches a milestone such as a 70th birthday, so I was thinking of giving His Royal Highness a jar of Corbyn Originals jam from my allotment. But I am now suffering from a deep crisis of confidence. Will my jam match up to the standard of the prince’s Duchy Originals jam? I do not know how to deal with this conundrum. If His Royal Highness is listening, perhaps he could offer some advice.

As the Prince of Wales reaches 70, I wish him and his family a very happy birthday on behalf of everyone on the Opposition Benches.

1.22 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow two incredibly generous speeches. I absolutely endorse and support everything that has been said so far about His Royal Highness, the Prince’s Trust and the other foundations. I have had the privilege and the honour of working closely with His Royal Highness in my capacity as the MP for North West Norfolk, which includes the Sandringham estate. When I was in the Foreign Office, I also had the privilege of accompanying him on two foreign visits, so I had a chance to see for myself his extraordinary personality.

Sandringham is a large and highly diversified estate that employs a significant number of people in my constituency and generates many more jobs through tourism. It is, without doubt, one of the most innovative estates in the country, with a lot of pioneering work going on around organic farming and soil structures,
habitat management, forestry, coastline and marshland preservation, and eco-housing for rent. His Royal Highness has played a pivotal role in all this, especially on the housing front. The Sandringham estate has built a number of new developments to be rented out, not just to people working on the estate, but to retired people and local people. In this way, it is setting the highest possible standards, and I applaud and salute that work.

His Royal Highness takes a very close interest in west Norfolk and the wider local community, and his advice and input has always been discreet, tactful and very much aware of the local political constraints. On occasions, I have had the opportunity to deal with him myself alongside the local borough council. When we have gone to him for advice, we have always found him incredibly approachable, but above all else is his convening power—a power to bring together different experts. Depending on what the situation demands, he has the experts to bring together, although he also has the most extraordinary knowledge himself.

I do not want to run through a lot of examples, but I should say that his foundation was absolutely indispensable in the redevelopment of King’s Lynn town centre, ensuring that we moved from what was going to be a very ordinary design to one that was quite exceptional. The Norfolk coastal footpath provides another example. And although recycling policy may sound very prosaic and boring, his input has been crucial at different times. He has also been involved in our work regarding the Construction Industry Training Board, which has a proud history in west Norfolk. We are doing our level best to persuade the board to keep its presence in west Norfolk, to develop the site and, above all, to make sure that when it puts its training contracts out to tender, we have the right people running those contracts so that we can use the organisation to help with skills and the whole apprenticeship agenda.

Behind the scenes, His Royal Highness has always shown so much interest, huge energy and a great sense of humour. Above all, he has an extraordinary ability to inspire, motivate and bring out the best in other people. Over the years, his dedication to helping advance the lives of people in Scotland through various projects has been invaluable to our society.

The Prince’s Foundation recently announced a new partnership with the Royal Lochnagar distillery. For those who have not experienced the whisky, I highly recommend it. The foundation has also been involved in building the new Duke of Rothesay Highland Games Pavilion and a visitor centre that charts the history of Scotland’s highland games. Again, I extend a welcome to His Royal Highness; there are many highland games throughout the country, not least in my own constituency, and there is no better way to spend a holiday than by participating in the rich variety of life that happens throughout the highland games season.

His Royal Highness is also a patron of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, and he has been hugely supportive of its work in its four gardens at Edinburgh, Benmore, Logan and Dawyck.

The Prince’s Foundation has created workshops in traditional arts and crafts, with educational facilities for many schools. One notable project that stands out is the support from the Prince’s Trust for Dumfries House, saved by the intervention of His Royal Highness, who used £20 million of his own charitable foundation’s money and personally brokered a £45 million deal to secure the house for the future. This has helped to create a sustainable business in an effort to support the regeneration of the local economy in east Ayrshire. Your Royal Highness, we applaud you for work in this regard. The outdoor centre there now supports a variety of residential opportunities. The activities and facilities at the outdoor centre help students to develop leadership skills and encourage personal development. The Get Into programmes at Dumfries are part of an effort to get young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in employment, education or training to a positive destination—a worthwhile project and a credit to His Royal Highness’s work in Scotland.

While there are many of us here who want to see a different future for our nations, we acknowledge the aspects of our shared cultures, our heritage and our history. For me, this is something we must acknowledge when we look at the role that His Royal Highness has across the UK, but of course also in Scotland.
Today, His Royal Highness celebrates his 70th birthday—a remarkable milestone for all who reach it, but particularly for someone who is so dedicated to a lifetime of public service. I thank His Royal Highness for his friendship with Scotland. On behalf of my party and all those we represent, I warmly wish him all the very best on this special day and for many years to come.

1.31 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the generous addresses that we have just heard.

For decades, the Prince of Wales has been a champion of the natural environment, and I want to take a moment of the House’s time to comment on that. Some people have pejoratively described it as meddling; I would call it contributing. He has been way ahead of most of us on many of these issues. He was talking about the danger of plastics in our oceans decades ago. His work on greenhouse gas emissions and climate change caused, at times, criticism—but again, he was way ahead of his time. Now he speaks a language that really has a remarkable affinity right across the political divide in this country. He raised these issues when it was unfashionable to do so. There is also his work on promoting the circular economy, which is now being mainstreamed by all parties in this House, moving away from the “extract, use, dump” culture to one that really does deal with how we use our natural resources in this country. In his book “Harmony”, which he co-wrote with Tony Juniper, he talked about the need to think about the use of the natural environment, and I want to take a moment on greenhouse gas emissions and climate change caused, at times, criticism—but again, he was way ahead of his time. Now he speaks a language that really has a remarkable affinity right across the political divide in this country. He raised these issues when it was unfashionable to do so. There is also his work on promoting the circular economy, which is now being mainstreamed by all parties in this House, moving away from the “extract, use, dump” culture to one that really does deal with how we use our natural resources in this country. In his book “Harmony”, which he co-wrote with Tony Juniper, he connected the environment with related issues such as health and wellbeing in a way that was really prescient for its time.

Let me conclude by mentioning—I think that this has already been commented on—his power as a convenor. There are very few people in this world who have the power to say, “There is a problem, which we need to talk about,” and world leaders, captains of industry and cultural figures will then jump on a plane to go to any corner of the world to engage in that problem. I have seen at first hand how he has been able to do that on issues such as oceans and fisheries and wildlife crime, with the extraordinary work of his International Sustainability Unit.

I am not a constitutional expert, so I cannot say what is or is not possible in the future. However, I want to take this opportunity to thank His Royal Highness for what he has provided and, I hope, will continue to provide—that is, thought, dialogue, reason and challenge.

1.33 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): It is a great privilege to join these tributes to the Prince of Wales. As somebody who crossed the milestone of a 70th birthday some years ago, I suggest that this is very much an opportunity for celebration rather than regret. Let me also add from personal experience that it should not represent a glass ceiling for progression to a bigger job. I have to say that in my five years in the Cabinet, I never received one of those letters in spidery handwriting requesting that I take action. I do not know whether to be offended or relieved that I did not.

I did have an opportunity, however, to see at first hand many of the achievements that stemmed from the prince’s commitment to helping disadvantaged young people—in particular, the role played by the Prince’s Trust, which was absolutely crucial in, for example, making a success of the start-up loans scheme, which operates with the British Business Bank and has launched thousands of young people with an opportunity to begin a life as entrepreneurs.

Several colleagues have already made a point of acknowledging the prince’s contribution to environmental thinking. We need to stress that he showed some courage in doing so—going way, way ahead of his time—while making the important point that we have to think about these issues both globally and locally. He has challenged many of the threats to the planet, but he has also sought to apply his thinking in practice in such gestures as taking his sons litter picking, for example. I add to the Prime Minister’s comment about the contribution he has made by bringing up his sons in this tradition of public service and commitment to tackling some of our difficult contemporary issues. We see this now in the excellent work by the two princes through the Royal Foundation in fields like mental health and early intervention.

Finally, I acknowledge the fact that the prince has been willing to tackle some very sensitive but important issues that directly bear on the royal family, most notably his advocacy of the fact that the role of the monarch should be the defender of faiths rather than the single faith. I wish to add my tribute and wish him and his family every happiness.

1.36 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a great pleasure and a privilege, on behalf of myself and my constituents, to wish His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales—or, indeed, the Duke of Rothesay, as he is better known north of the border—many happy returns on his 70th birthday.

His Royal Highness is a well-kent and welcome face in Scotland. He has taken a considerable interest in the architectural heritage of this nation, not least in preserving for the community and the nation the beautiful Dumfries House in my constituency. In hosting events such as the annual Boswell book festival, farming conferences and a recent Police Scotland seminar, Dumfries House remains a focal point for the whole community in East Ayrshire. It also stimulates tourism and is an excellent source of employment and training locally, which is vital. His Royal Highness has given hope and opportunity to many, many young people.

The prince has also embraced and supported other projects locally, working in New Cumnock in partnership with the Sir Tom Hunter Foundation and others towards the restoration of the beautiful red sandstone of New Cumnock town hall, as ever utilising good-quality construction and design methods. Also in New Cumnock, he was a driving force for not so much the refurbishment but the rebuilding of the New Cumnock outdoor swimming pool—which will be the best in the United Kingdom, I am sure, and is well worth a visit. The Prince’s Foundation also supports the very popular Cumnock Tryst music festival held there each year, which celebrated its fifth anniversary this very year.

On behalf of the residents of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock—and, indeed, Scotland—I would very much like to wish His Royal Highness many happy returns on
his threescore years and ten today. Finally, as a former firefighter, I would ask His Royal Highness to be careful with the candles on his cake.

1.38 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): On behalf of my right hon. and hon. Friends, and the people we represent in Northern Ireland, I am delighted to speak in this Humble Address and to endorse what has already been said by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and the other speakers so far. We express our heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

His Royal Highness has, over the course of his entire life, shown total devotion to supporting Her Majesty in the discharge of her duties both at home and abroad, and he has made a massive contribution in his own right to the role of the monarchy in our national life and across the globe.

In addition to supporting Her Majesty the Queen, with an almost unrivalled schedule of duties and commitments, he champions many important causes that have helped to transform the lives of countless people across the United Kingdom. His has been a life of duty that has earned His Royal Highness the thanks of a grateful nation. He has had a truly enriching impact upon our country, our precious Union and our Commonwealth, transcending borders, language and generations. His pursuit of the causes of peace, prosperity, the countryside and the environment has touched the lives of so many.

For me, one of the highlights of his work was the founding of the Prince’s Trust, which to this day continues to support those most in need in our society. I have no doubt that Members from all parties can testify to the amazing impact that the Prince’s Trust has had on the lives of their constituents and in many communities. For those facing homelessness, health problems, educational disadvantage or difficult times, the Prince’s Trust has often been there to put their lives back on track.

His Royal Highness holds a special place in the hearts of the people of Northern Ireland, shown by the warmth with which he has been received on his countless visits to Ulster. During the darkest days of our recent past, His Royal Highness continued to visit Northern Ireland very regularly in the face of threats and danger. It is his willingness to support those who suffered so much at the hands of terrorism, combined with his own personal loss, that made him a figure of so much admiration. A particularly poignant quote that has stuck with me came from the families of the victims of the Omagh bombing, who said on His Royal Highness’s visit to the site of the bombing. “It shows he hasn’t forgotten our suffering.” His Royal Highness has exemplified the qualities of duty, sacrifice and service to our country, and for the future may he and his family know God’s richest blessing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I gently point out that there are a number of Members standing and seeking to catch my eye who did not indicate any intention to take part in these exchanges. It seems rather curious for a Member not to have put in to speak but suddenly to bob. It is simply not in conformity with our procedures, and we have a Second Reading of a Bill. I hope I have made the position clear.

1.42 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I shall keep my words brief. Windsor is home to the military in the form of the Household Cavalry, which is the presentation regiment for the royal household and the protection unit, and to the monarchy, with Windsor castle being the longest continuously inhabited castle in the country.

It strikes me whenever I meet the prince just how dedicated he is to public life, over so many years and to so many different causes. The Prince’s Trust takes care of disadvantaged youngsters by providing entrepreneurial loans so that they can make their own way in life, which is a fine thing to do. His passions for the environment and architecture are well known.

Prince Charles has a strong heart and a good heart, with a strong voice in convening people around the issues in which he believes. We know in this place just how challenging it can be to speak out on key issues—one is often condemned if one does, and condemned if one does not—and yet the prince has managed to speak out on many issues, without causing offence, and in a way that opens up areas for public debate that we may otherwise not have opened up.

In this place we are volunteers, and yet the prince has taken on his duties and his responsibilities through a sense of commitment to the country. On behalf of the residents of the Windsor constituency, and on behalf of myself and other Members, I wish Prince Charles a very happy birthday.

1.43 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): You may ask, Mr Speaker, why somebody committed to Welsh independence and an elected Head of State would want to take part in this debate on the Humble Address. One of the main lessons I have learned in politics is that it is always wise to be nice to one’s constituents. As Members may know, the Welsh residency of His Royal Highness is situated in the north of my constituency, in the Tywi valley. He is held in huge regard by many of my constituents, and I know that he shares my deep love for the county of Carmarthenshire and the Tywi valley in particular.

I have met the prince on several occasions, and he is a deeply intelligent and humorous person. I will share one short story with the House. I met him for the first time soon after being elected in 2010, at the opening of Frank’s Ice Cream in Carmarthenshire, which makes the best ice cream in Wales, if not the world. In the line-up to meet the prince was my father, who is the local county councillor, Councillor Kevin Madge, the leader of Carmarthenshire County Council, and myself. As the prince worked his way down the line, he got to me: the lord lieutenant whispered in his ear that he had just met my father, and the prince said, quick as a flash, “Ah! Hereditary”.

In all seriousness, whatever anyone thinks of the monarchy as an institution, the prince’s lifetime of commitment to public service is something to be commended, and I am happy to do so on behalf of my party today.
1.45 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I want to briefly express my admiration for the Prince of Wales and all his work on climate change, the environment and our oceans. In particular, I want to thank him and his wife, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cornwall, for their great patronage of our nation’s armed forces and the ships, regiments and squadrons of which they are colonels.

I have seen at first hand just how close a relationship they have with those regiments and the personal interest they take in not only the lives of the men and women serving in those units, but their families, those who have served in the units previously, those who are bereaved as a result of soldiers, sailors and airmen serving in those units being killed in action and those who have been injured in the course of their duties. On behalf of my constituents and all those soldiers, sailors and airmen who hold both His Royal Highness and Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cornwall in such high regard, I wish him a happy birthday.

1.46 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to pay my respects and to wish His Royal Highness a very happy birthday, as well as to acknowledge all the work he has done on the environment and his interfaith work, sometimes against being popular, to ensure that there is the respect for all faiths that our country needs at every level of our society.

I want briefly to mention the prince’s work in supporting teachers and excellence in teaching, particularly through the Prince’s Teaching Institute. That institute and its chief executive, Chris Pope, have been very important and supportive in a project that we have started in Hounslow, Hounslow’s Promise, which supports social mobility, education and employability. The support and interest of the prince and his charity make a huge difference in our local endeavours. It is a mark of the prince that he takes a great interest in how what he does nationally makes a difference locally. For that reason, I wish him a very happy birthday and hope that his family enjoy their celebrations.

1.47 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I apologise for my error, Mr Speaker—I thought that we did not have to put in to speak in a Humble Address debate. I will be very brief.

I was driven to speak because I grew up on a family farm that belonged to Prince Charles, so we were effectively his tenants; perhaps I should declare an interest. It was a wonderful farm on which to grow up. Prince Charles is such an advocate for farming, and his farms are prevalent in the west country. He should be applauded for the ease and insight with which he engages with the farming community.

I remember when he came to our farm one time. It was all top-secret, but we were invited to lunch with him, and he engaged, with great insight, with everybody on every subject to do with farming. I was also pleased that, of all the puddings on the table, he chose mine to eat.

I want to pay tribute to his wider work in the rural community. Prince Charles really understands why we need our rural communities to remain vibrant. He does a great amount of work on that through his Duchy College and his skills, training and apprenticeship courses. That is very important.

Colleagues have mentioned the prince’s work on the wider environment and nature, biodiversity and wildlife, and he has really helped to get soils on the agenda. All his climate change work has to be applauded. As others have said, he was ahead of the game on that, and many people are now following on the work he began.

The prince has a great interest in horticulture and gardening, and he is a great advocate worldwide. The UK is the home of gardening, and to have somebody in our royal family who is an advocate for it is brilliant for the tourism that it attracts and the wider industry. He has a show garden at Highgrove. I was lucky enough to go there with the Somerset Gardens Trust. It is a tremendous place to visit, if people get the chance. It is a tremendous advert for us worldwide. I share something in common with Prince Charles: he talks to his plants, and so do I. I do not see anything wrong with it. On that note, I wish him a very happy birthday and a blossoming next few decades.

1.50 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As you are aware, Mr Speaker, I represent a far-flung and far away part of the British Isles. It is on behalf of the people who live there that I want to thank the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Rothesay. For some years, he has been coming to stay in his grandmother’s old home, the castle of Mey in Caithness. He loves that castle as much as one can imagine. He comes in August, and every time he takes the trouble to go on a series of visits to businesses, enterprises and such like right throughout my constituency. The time and trouble he takes on those visits to talk to everyone beggars belief. In fact, I do not think he ever has lunch. One of the things I do is put a Mars bar in my pocket.

The prince’s schedules almost always overrun because he is so busy saying hello to absolutely everyone. I cannot tell you, Mr Speaker, how much that means to my constituents. We are far, far away from London. I think what lies behind it is that he feels at ease in my part of the world. I feel easy with him, and there is a real thread of kindness. The milk of human kindness is there, and that is appreciated by my constituents. On behalf of the good people of Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, I wish him many, many happy returns. It is my privilege to do so.

Mr Speaker: I think that completes the contributions on this important matter.

Question put and agreed to, nemine contradicente.
Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill

Second Reading

1.51 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): I beg to move. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a short Bill, with six clauses, to enable continuity of healthcare for British nationals and EU citizens after Britain leaves the European Union. It is clearly in the interests of the British public to ensure reciprocal healthcare arrangements continue when we leave the EU, whether that happens through an agreement with the EU itself or through individual agreements with EU member states. By enabling us to implement those arrangements, the Bill will help us to help nearly 200,000 British pensioners living in EU countries to continue to access medical treatment that they need, and it will mean that the hundreds of thousands of British citizens who require medical treatment each year during holidays in Europe can still be covered for medical assistance when they need it.

The Bill will help to ensure that UK nationals who live and work in EU countries can continue to access healthcare on the same basis as local people. It will mean that EU citizens can be covered for reciprocal healthcare here, so that the UK continues to be a place tourists want to visit and vital workers, such as our NHS workforce, want to live in. The Bill will also mean that we can continue to recover healthcare costs from Europe as we do now.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): A few years ago, I presented a private Member’s Bill on the recovery of costs under the European health insurance card scheme. More than half of NHS trusts did not record the treating of foreign nationals at all so that they could claim back on those reciprocal arrangements. Can I get an assurance that, under the new arrangements, the NHS will be properly refunded for the care it provides to those from other countries?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Perhaps I should declare that, when I was a Back Bencher, I tabled a number of parliamentary questions on that very issue, relating to my hospitals and to claiming. We pay out around tenfold what we recover. I will come on to that point, but part of the Bill relates to the NHS’s increased focus on the issue, which he is correct to raise.

Reciprocal healthcare agreements benefit people in all regions and nations of the United Kingdom. The Department of Health and Social Care currently funds and arranges EU reciprocal healthcare for people from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Bill will allow us to continue doing that, if agreed with the EU. We have been working for some time now with the devolved Administrations and will of course continue to do so to ensure that we legislate for reciprocal healthcare in a way that fully respects the devolution settlements.

We can all agree that access to healthcare is essential both for British nationals living in European countries and for EU citizens living in the UK. The Bill will also allow us to strengthen existing reciprocal healthcare agreements with non-EU countries and explore new arrangements. As the Prime Minister said last night, the negotiations for our departure are now in the endgame and we are working to reach an agreement. As Members would expect, we are continuing to make the necessary preparations for all scenarios. It is in everyone’s interests to secure a good deal, but it is the job of a responsible Government to prepare for all scenarios, including in the event that we reach March 2019 without agreeing a deal.

In the event of no deal, the powers in the Bill will help to implement deals with EU countries that will seek to provide continuity of care for UK nationals and avoid a cliff edge. The powers will enable the UK to act swiftly to protect existing healthcare cover for British nationals in the EU, the European economic area and Switzerland, whether deals are made with the EU or individual member states. That is in the interests of everyone and, most importantly, will benefit millions of UK nationals who live, study, work or travel in mainland Europe.

British people who have paid their taxes in the UK their whole working lives and have retired to Spain, France or other EU countries should not have to worry about healthcare and how much it is going to cost them. Similarly, the millions of British people who travel to mainland Europe each year should be able to do so with the peace of mind that the European health insurance card scheme brings. These schemes are popular across the UK. There are currently 27 million EHIC cards in circulation in the UK, with 5 million issued each year. Reciprocal healthcare arrangements enable UK nationals to access healthcare whether they live in, work in or visit EU countries.

The current arrangements involve EU member states reimbursing one another for healthcare costs. We support UK nationals in the EU by spending approximately £630 million a year on healthcare for British expats and tourists. At present, we recover £66 million each year from EU member states under the same rules, but that amount is increasing as the NHS gets better at identifying EU visitors and ensuring that the UK is reimbursed for care provided, which speaks to the point that my hon. Friend raised. It is a net spend because many more British pensioners and tourists go to Europe than the other way around.

It is clearly in the interests of the British public to ensure that reciprocal healthcare arrangements similar to those currently in place continue when we leave the EU. The Bill does not affect the UK’s ability to negotiate or enter into international agreements, and the details of any new reciprocal healthcare arrangements will remain subject to negotiation and parliamentary scrutiny.

Until now, the majority of UK-EU reciprocal healthcare has been enabled by EU regulations. Once we leave the European Union, the EU reciprocal healthcare arrangements will no longer apply in the UK in their current form and we will need new legislation to provide for future arrangements. With a deal, the withdrawal agreement will enable the continuation of existing reciprocal healthcare rules during the implementation period, and afterwards for people covered by that withdrawal agreement, but it is not a long-term arrangement for the British public as a whole, does not provide for the event of the withdrawal agreement not being concluded and does not cover healthcare arrangements with countries worldwide.

The UK already has important agreements in place with Australia, New Zealand and many of our Crown dependencies and overseas territories and the Bill will
help us to strengthen those, should we wish to, or seek new arrangements with other countries. The Bill underscores the Government’s commitment to reaching a robust reciprocal healthcare agreement with the EU.

This is important and necessary legislation, introduced so that the British public can look to the future with confidence that they will get the healthcare they need, when they need it. I commend the Bill to the House.

1.59 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Of course, the Opposition welcome any efforts to safeguard healthcare for the estimated 190,000 UK expats living in the EU and the 50 million or so nationals who travel abroad to EEA countries each year. We have concerns about some clauses, which we will address in Committee.

It is 874 days since the UK voted to leave the EU, although for many of us it seems a whole lot longer. It is also a year since the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 was introduced, so it is a matter of some concern that this Bill is only now being introduced.

As the Minister rightly said, the Bill gives the Secretary of State wide-ranging powers, including the power to amend primary legislation through a Henry VIII-style clause, but it places no obligation on the Secretary of State to report back to Parliament, even in the event that a reciprocal deal cannot be reached. That, combined with the scope for extensive use of statutory instruments under the negative procedure, represents to us an unacceptable lack of parliamentary oversight of an issue that will impact on the daily lives of millions of people. The Secretary of State ought to have learned from previous attempts that this Parliament does not react kindly when asked to sign a blank cheque. We will, therefore, seek to ensure that any new powers granted are proportionate and that all regulations are subject to the affirmative procedure.

We recognise the need for this Bill, because without a reciprocal agreement, UK citizens living in the EU, and vice versa, could find themselves having to pay for and make complicated arrangements to access healthcare in the country in which they live or that they visit. The biggest impact will be felt by the 190,000 state pensioners living abroad, and by those with long-term health conditions who could be prevented from travelling for business and leisure by prohibitively high insurance costs. There does appear to be some doubt about the figure of 190,000. The DWP website Stat-Xplore, which provides details of UK pensioners across EU and EEA countries, shows the figure for the EU27 as 468,793 in May 2018. I would be grateful if the Minister offered some clarification on that discrepancy.

We support the Government’s aim of retaining the current model of reciprocal healthcare. We are, however, extremely concerned that, with just over four months to go until we leave, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about whether all the hoops can be jumped through. Although the arrangements may continue as part of a withdrawal agreement if it gets through Cabinet, Parliament and the rest of the EU, there is just as much chance that we will need a whole new set of arrangements, which could radically alter the situation.
“Looking at relative hospital demand by age group, we might expect 190,000 people to require 900 more hospital beds and 1,600 nurses, as well as doctors, other health professionals, and support staff such as porters. This number of additional beds would be equivalent to two new hospitals the size of St Mary’s Hospital in London.”

The implications for and potential demand on resources if arrangements are not made are huge. Of course, if the higher figure for pensioners in the EU is correct, those demands could more than double.

The European health insurance card benefits everyone who travels from the UK to EEA countries, but it is particularly beneficial for those with long-term conditions. The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has set out that the EHIC enables such individuals to do so “without the need for expensive travel and health insurance.”

One example of that is the 29,000 patients in the UK who receive kidney dialysis, typically three days per week. For those 29,000 patients, who can currently access dialysis across Europe—from Rotterdam to Rome—taking away the EHIC would take away their freedom. Travelling for work, for leisure or to visit family would be prohibitively expensive for them if we were not able to reach a comprehensive reciprocal healthcare agreement. Even if the Government were able to negotiate bilateral agreements, it would be of little comfort to a kidney dialysis patient who wished to attend a family wedding in Italy if they could access treatment only in France, Spain or Ireland.

The BMA and others have set out that patients with disabilities would be among the most affected if there were no reciprocal healthcare agreement. According to the BMA, without the EHIC, people with disabilities could find that travel or health insurance was “especially expensive and potentially difficult to arrange”.

The Law Society of Scotland has reported that more than a quarter of disabled adults already felt that they were charged more for travel insurance, or simply denied it, because of their conditions. It is a matter of concern that the impact assessment does not explore the consequences of not reaching a deal for disabled people and those with long-term conditions. I therefore call upon the Minister to ensure that such an analysis is undertaken as an early priority.

Another question mark that hangs over the entire process is how dispute resolution will work, in either a deal or a no-deal scenario. Throughout the entire Brexit process, one of the red lines in the negotiations has been the role played by the European Court of Justice. However, I have yet to hear any suggestion about how, if we manage to reach a full reciprocal healthcare agreement with the EU27, disputes could be resolved without some reference, ultimately, back to the ECJ. The same would apply to bilateral agreements. If, for example, we reach an agreement with Spain and there is a disagreement about a payment made or the administration of the scheme—that could happen from time to time—who will determine which side is in the right?

When he gave evidence to the Health Committee, Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, considered this dilemma and said that “as the two simplest ways” of resolving dispute resolution “have been ruled out by the Prime Minister, I do not see how you can do it.”

What kind of dispute resolution procedure does the Minister envisage either in a full agreement scenario, or in the case of bilateral agreements with individual states? Can he confirm whether the Government’s position is still that the ECJ will have no jurisdiction over such issues?

Clause 4 provides a legal basis for processing data to facilitate any agreements after the UK leaves the EU. Although facilitating data processing is a necessary element of any reciprocal agreement to support the making of payments for healthcare outside the UK, I note that appropriate safeguards are referred to in the Bill, and I ask for clarification about what those safeguards are and how they would work in practice. We have concerns that the Bill appears to allow the Secretary of State to hand personal data to private providers and to allow private providers to process that data. We will look to explore that further in Committee if the Minister, in winding up, is not able to satisfy us on the need for those powers, the extent to which they will be used, and what safeguards will be applied.

Another issue we will face, particularly if we are not able to agree a full reciprocal agreement, is cost recovery. Members have already referred to the challenges on that. The BMA set out clearly to the House of Lords Committee that:

“Managing access to health services by non-EU citizens is bureaucratically more burdensome than managing access for EU nationals currently”,

and that “in the event that the current reciprocal arrangements with the EU were to be discontinued...could have considerable resource and administrative implications for hospitals in both the UK and the EU.”

As I set out before, it is deeply concerning that this potential challenge does not appear to have been considered in the impact assessment. Even under the current arrangements, cost recovery is something that we do not appear to have handled satisfactorily and the fault lies with the Government.

In 2012-13, the NHS charged only about 65% of what it could have done to visitors from outside the EEA and Switzerland, and only 16% of what it could have done to visitors from within that area. I accept that things have improved since then, and that the Department set itself a recovery target of £500 million overall and £200 million for EEA and Switzerland patients, which it hoped to achieve by 2017-18, but it still appears to be well behind on those targets. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could advise us on the latest projections for that. He mentioned a figure of £66 million earlier, but it was not clear which particular period that related to.

The Law Society of Scotland was clear on the importance of this issue when it gave evidence to the Lords Committee. It said:

“as the NHS has never been very effective in reclaiming the fees owed to it by overseas visitors to the UK, the UK may find itself substantially worse off financially when new arrangements for funding cross-national use of health services are put in place.”

Even the Health Minister in the other place admitted that there was a “job to be done” on cost recovery. Irrespective of Brexit, it is deeply concerning that millions of pounds that should be spent on UK patients by the NHS is going to waste because of a failure to get a grip on cost recovery.
Giving evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, NHS Improvement said that it was going to monitor charging and cost recovery, and intervene where trusts have not met their statutory obligations. Will the Minister advise us on whether it has done so? If there is an additional administrative burden on the NHS in setting up new systems of cost recovery, will the Minister give a commitment that NHS providers will be adequately compensated?

It is a concern that the Bill gives the Secretary of State wide powers with little recourse to Parliament. Where are the checks and balances if the NHS ends up having to police 27-plus different sets of arrangements? What if the deals reached end up costing far more? What if our cost recovery continues to lag well behind what it should be? There needs to be greater parliamentary oversight of all these issues.

The importance of getting a good deal on reciprocal healthcare is more significant in the countries where it is accessed most, none more so than in the case of the island of Ireland. For anyone who has visited some of the more rural areas along the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as I did during the summer, it is clear the extent to which crossing the border is a part of day-to-day life for those communities. The border area has a dispersed population of around 2 million people. Currently, this combined population offers the economies of scale necessary to provide health services, which would be completely unsustainable were a hard border to be put in place. Cooperation and Working Together, a partnership of health services from both sides of the border, has set out clearly that there are many examples where patients’ lives have been saved because of free and open access for emergency services across the border. If we do not get the right agreement in place, there is a real danger that we could see a situation where one ambulance drives up to one side of the border and another from the other side meets it to transfer a patient. These are the very practical implications of the Bill we are discussing today.

Reciprocal healthcare arrangements on the island date back to before the UK and the Republic of Ireland joined the EU, but they are now underpinned by EU law. We welcome the commitment by both Governments to ensure that the current arrangements will continue after Brexit, but the UK Government have yet to explain clearly exactly how they will approach these issues in practice. The border issue has clearly been a sticking point in the overall negotiations, so we will have to monitor very closely what the final deal says on that.

I want to say a few words about devolution. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have clearly and robustly articulated their support for a continuation of reciprocal healthcare agreements. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out the extent to which he has engaged with the devolved Administrations as part of that process. The House of Lords Committee was clear in its position on future arrangements, but I am not aware that anything has taken place to date. The Bill gives wide-ranging powers to the Secretary of State, but places no obligation on him to consult or engage with the devolved Administrations before making regulations.

What assurances can the Minister give us that that will take place, particularly well ahead of any new arrangements being put in place?

In conclusion, this is a very short Bill, but one that will have far-reaching implications. The Secretary of State is asking for powers, which will have a direct influence on the day-to-day lives of hundreds of thousands of people without providing us with clarity on how he will use them. The Bill has been two years in the making and yet the impact assessment provided is totally insufficient, if not inaccurate, and there seems to have been little appreciation of the complexity of the task at hand or the implications if things go wrong. All of that is amidst the deal or no deal circus we have at the moment. The Government are asking for the powers to make agreements with other countries, but they cannot get an agreement around the Cabinet table. We will see, possibly by the end of the debate, whether that turns out to be correct.

We are in no doubt that the continuation of reciprocal healthcare is absolutely essential. We will not oppose the progress of the Bill today, but we will press for the safeguards needed to ensure that proper regulations and oversight are put in place, and that the interests of patients are protected.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I welcome this paving measure, which I think will give significant comfort to many thousands of mainly elderly and often very frightened United Kingdom expat citizens mainly in Europe, but also around the world. For reasons I will not bore the House with, I have a very extended network of contacts with the expat community mainly within European Union countries but also worldwide. I want to concentrate for a few minutes mostly on those people.

The people I want to talk about are expat United Kingdom citizens who by and large have spent their working lives paying taxes and national insurance here in Britain, and who, for reasons of family, health or sun, have moved to France or Spain. There is also a significant community living throughout the rest of the European Union and one should most certainly not overlook the needs of those who are resident in the EU for professional purposes. Those include all manner of circumstances, for example people working for companies or on Her Majesty’s service in one form or another. The degree of uncertainty that has surrounded their healthcare futures has been considerable and very worrying. I do not think we can over-egg that.

I want to raise one specific concern, which relates to the emphasis on reciprocity. I say that because I happen to chair the all-party group on frozen British pensions. A frozen pensioner is one who is living in any country other than the United Kingdom and is entitled to a UK pension uprated in line with inflation. What I do not want to see is that situation replicated in this deal, so that we get a second class healthcare system whereby people in some countries within the European Union get healthcare while others do not. I hope very much it will be possible to strike a deal with the remaining
27 European Union countries, rather than cherry-picking each country and then having to work out who is entitled to "free" healthcare and who is not. That would be a nightmare. If we are going to get this right, and we must get it right, we have to make sure that everybody is covered.

Tourists fall under a slightly different category. Tourists who go right around the world expect to take out health insurance for their travel. I see no reason why they should not do so and why they should not do so in the European Union countries once we have left.

For those who choose to live in countries such as France, Spain, Greece and Italy in the European Union, we have to make very special provision. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to ask my hon. Friend the Minister to make sure that we do not allow this measure, which is very valuable indeed, to become subject to the law of unintended consequences. We must roll as smoothly as possible from EHIC to a new system that is fair to the taxpayer. I take entirely the point that this cannot be a blank cheque, but we must make sure that the elderly and vulnerable, who have chosen to live overseas having paid their taxes here, are well, truly and properly covered.

2.19 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Clearly, Brexit threatens the loss of reciprocal healthcare arrangements for millions in Scotland and across the UK. As a bottom line, the Scottish National party believes that all current reciprocal health agreements must remain intact, regardless of what form Brexit takes. The Bill is yet another rushed job on the part of the Government. In their panic, they have woken up to the fact that millions across the UK and thousands of expats abroad, particularly pensioners, could face having either no access to healthcare within the EU or paying exorbitant costs for treatment. It is another example whereby no contingency planning was done prior to the Brexit referendum.

With an estimated 900,000 to 1.2 million UK citizens living in the European economic area and 3.2 million EEA citizens residing in the UK, Brexit will potentially have severe ramifications for them and the NHS. Approximately 27 million active EHIC cards are in circulation as of September 2017. They are used to pay for around £250,000 medical treatments each year. Ensuring that all current reciprocal health agreements remain intact and in place must be the bottom line regardless of what form Brexit takes.

The consequences of a no-deal Brexit on healthcare are yet one more example of why this extreme Tory Brexit is not worth the cost. In evidence to the House of Lords EU Committee, a representative from the Association of British Insurers gave a rough estimate that in a no-deal scenario, travel insurance premiums for EU travel could increase by 10% to 20%. A no-deal scenario will end up restricting the travel arrangements of those with underlying health conditions and disabilities. In such a scenario, the British Medical Association said that the insurance issue will be

"a particular concern for those with disabilities or long-term conditions, as the cost of health and travel insurance for those with pre-existing conditions could be prohibitively high."

The Bill's impact assessment concludes that in a no-deal scenario:

- If UK citizens in the EU are treated as 3rd country nationals (i.e., they cease to have rights of movement and access to services in EU Member States, and are treated like citizens coming from non-EU countries) some may face additional financial costs or difficulties accessing healthcare services, with potential implications for their health and wellbeing."

That is something none of us wants to see.

Reciprocal healthcare arrangements must not be viewed as affecting only those who live or travel abroad. The impact of a no-deal Brexit would have a devastating effect on our NHS services at home. The agreement in the joint report does not provide long-term assurances regarding the future of the EHIC. As things stand, health insurance will stop for millions of UK citizens post-Brexit.

While the UK Government have stated their commitment to securing ongoing access to the EHIC, the EU has been unwilling to agree to that due to the Government’s stance on freedom of movement post-Brexit. The UK would also be a significant outlier were it to retain access to reciprocal schemes while ending freedom of movement. The SNP position on single market and customs union membership would, of course, remove all such obstacles.

If these healthcare schemes were removed, it would inevitably lead to massive pressures on the NHS, as UK citizens return home to receive treatment. Those pressures are compounded by the impact of the health workforce reduction, which has seen England and Scotland lose 19% and 14% of EU doctors respectively and a 90% drop in EU nurses registering to work in the UK.

As we have heard, the UK contributes around £630 million annually towards UK citizens’ care and receives £50 million—I think the Minister mentioned £60 million—for care provided to EU nationals in the UK. The BMA and the Nuffield Trust has estimated that if the UK did not conclude a withdrawal agreement with the EU, and were all these pensioners to return to the UK, the NHS would need some 900 additional beds and 1,600 nurses to ensure sufficient capacity. All in all, providing this additional healthcare would amount to somewhere in the region of £1 billion.

Current EU nationals living in the UK could face losing access to health facilities. First, their residency was threatened and now their healthcare rights are in danger; we must give them peace of mind and security. Were the UK to lose access to existing reciprocal arrangements and no alternative be established, EEA citizens living in or visiting the UK would also face a significant change in their access to care. Depending on the deal secured between the UK and the EU on citizens’ rights, this could mean that EEA residents might face the same costs and terms of access to the NHS as other non-EEA visitors and migrants do currently.

The Scottish Government have never been opposed to common frameworks, but these must be agreed in discussion and with the consent of the devolved Administrations. I was grateful to hear the Minister’s commitment to working with the devolved nations in this regard. We all understand the desperate need for all these reciprocal healthcare agreements to continue and the Scottish Government will work with the UK Government to ensure that they do.

Through the Joint Ministerial Committee, we believe that a common framework system can be achieved that ensures these specific health agreements can be administered through common agreement between the UK Government and the Scottish Government.
Many issues need to be resolved for this to happen effectively, particularly if we are forced to deal with a no-deal Brexit. For instance, in Scotland, unlike in England, certain categories of resident non-EU overseas patients are exempted from healthcare charges, including the self-employed, volunteers and students. In Wales and Northern Ireland, regulations provide similar exemptions, and in Northern Ireland they clarify that entitlements are applicable both to primary and secondary care.

As Professor Jean McHale told the Lords inquiry on this very issue, post-Brexit “if there are no reciprocal agreements on healthcare made with other EU member states and treatment is sought other than in an emergency situation then certain EU citizens could be exempt from NHS charges for secondary care... if they are living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland whereas this would not be the case in relation to those resident in England.”

In conclusion, I am not opposing the Bill, as it basically just gives powers to the Secretary of State to agree reciprocal deals, and I look forward to the Bill Committee where we can progress those further. However, I point out that today’s business is another example of otherwise unnecessary work related to Brexit coming before us. This prompts the question of just how much time and effort is being put into such work that could have been used for other things, had we not been going through the Brexit fiasco. I believe that we will not get a better reciprocal arrangement deal than we currently have.

2.26 pm

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I welcome the Government bringing forward the Bill. This is clearly part of a suite of legislation to prepare for the changes that Brexit will bring about. It is also pretty critical that at the end of the day, a deal is done to allow this to work in a smooth and effective fashion.

Brits like to travel; over 50 million go abroad. Most of them go with family members, and many retire abroad. Those who do not come to Poole may go to the Costa Blanca or elsewhere, and health for older residents is one of the big concerns. The European health insurance card system has worked pretty well. There is no point, just because we object to some aspects of European integration, objecting to other aspects that may be beneficial to our citizens and those of the EU, so the Government’s intent to try to replicate the system—whatever happens with Brexit—is very sensible and good. The fact that a quarter of a million people used the EHIC card last year indicates how important that is for many people.

I welcome what the Government are doing. It is a necessary precaution. I do not begrudge spending a bit of time in this House dealing with the concerns of older people retired abroad or of Brits who want to travel, so it is important to get the Bill through today. This measure will only be for two or three years and then there will be further legislation. Some Opposition Members talk about the Secretary of State being given powers, but we are living in slightly extraordinary times, and I suspect that we will come back to legislation in this area in a couple of years.

The Government are doing a very sensible thing. I hope that it is part of an overall agreement, because that would be the easiest way to do it. Clearly, if we have to do this on a bilateral basis, that will take longer and there may well be cliff edges that cause problems for some pensioners. Therefore, when Members sometimes say that there must be a deal when they are already somewhat committed to voting against a deal, I wonder whether they ought to look at the detail of what will happen if we have no deal. This is one of the areas that will cause problems for Brits who live abroad and travel abroad and for some EU people who come to the UK as tourists. We should understand that this country benefits greatly from the tourist trade. We have only to walk around London—around Leicester Square and other areas not far from here—to see the many thousands of people who travel. They, too, need peace of mind.

This is a good piece of legislation, then, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) that the ethos of the NHS is such that it does not like taking money off people, even when it should. I once stood in A&E and watched an American take out a credit card, only to be told, “You don’t need to do that here.” Sometimes people are busy and have six jobs and are phishing into their pockets, while others work abroad on their jobs and deal with backlogs, but there is an issue with us getting proper recompense. The former Health Secretary made a good point: it is a national health service, not an international health service.

Some years ago, when I was serving on the Health Select Committee, we interviewed chief executives of trusts, and they said there was a problem sometimes with the disproportionate cost of pursuing fees and that some people actually come to London on holiday who happen to be pregnant and who end up in London hospitals at a cost to the British taxpayer, so the health service does sometimes attract people who try to take advantage of the system as well.

The figures from the Library are stark. We pay out 10 times more than we claim back from the EU and the other states in the scheme. Although some of that is because there are older people abroad and Poles tend to have six jobs and be younger, some of the figures are still quite remarkable.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend accept, though, that the majority of the difference is due to the disproportionate number of British pensioners living abroad compared to the number of EEA foreign nationals living here as pensioners?

Sir Robert Syms: That is a factor, but I still think that a 10:1 ratio is quite high. London has the second-largest French population, behind only Paris, yet we claim back only £5.3 million from France. That is quite a stark figure, and one wonders why we are not claiming back rather more. I gently make that point. I know the Minister is aware of it. When we redo this, we have to emphasise to trusts the requirement to recoup money, because that means more money for British people using the service and for other services, but sometimes it falls down the priority list. I am not sure there is a magic bullet. It probably requires drilling lots of people in A&Es up and down the land to focus on whether people should be paying or getting free treatment.

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill. It is a good step forward. It will help to reassure those concerned about what the future will bring, and I look forward to seeing what the Government bring back on Third Reading.
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We have heard many comforting words from the Government today, but there is nothing comforting in the proposals in the Bill. If we Brexit, UK citizens here and abroad will lose their rights to automatic healthcare in other EU countries. The automatic right to healthcare in Europe has been one of the visible successes of the single market—a peaceful continent and EU countries working together. If we Brexit, new healthcare arrangements will need to be negotiated with the EU or EU countries individually, and the Bill is intended to make it possible for the Government to negotiate those new arrangements.

The Government intend to do this by using Henry VIII powers. Today could be the last time this Parliament discusses how 70 million UK citizens can go abroad and receive, or not receive, healthcare while there, not to mention the non-UK EU citizens who live in or travel to the UK. We have been through this debate before. Henry VIII powers are the preferred route for a Government who want to bypass parliament and get Brexit through at any price, including the price of democracy. This debate comes at a time when the Government are proposing a deal with the EU. There were only ever three possible outcomes for the UK in this negotiation: no deal, Brexit in name only, or staying in the EU. It looks like the Prime Minister has gone for Brexit in name only, although of course she will not call it that. Brexit in name only means staying in the customs union and the single market, and it could mean retaining healthcare within the EU. That would be good news. The bad news is that no UK Minister or bureaucrat will be around the table with the EU27. We will be receiving our instructions, and that is it. When the EU decides changes, we will be notified and have to implement the changes. Henry VIII powers will be a way to hide our national humiliation.

The political question is why anybody would vote for Brexit in name only. It is not just a fudge; it is the worst of all possible worlds. It will, perversely, do the opposite of taking back control; it will keep us in complete dependency but without any say. Many parliamentarians have woken up to the fact, or have known for a long time, that our only secure economic future and the only way to guarantee all the rights we have negotiated, including free healthcare, lies in being a member of the EU. As we have heard today, rather than getting a Brexit dividend from the NHS, the new arrangement might end up being extremely costly for this country.

Why do we not dare to say it loud and clear? Not saying it loud and clear is dishonest; Brexit in name only is dishonest. To do something dishonest and call it the will of the people is a travesty. Only the people themselves should decide what is done in the name of the people. Let us ask the people. Let us give the people a say on whether they really had all this in mind when they voted in 2016. Let us give people a chance to decide that when all is said and done they want to stay in the EU. And of course that would make the Bill completely unnecessary.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I will be supporting the Bill today. I am only sorry it is necessary. There is no version of Brexit that will benefit people who rely on the NHS, social care, scientific research or public health; there are only varying degrees of harm. The Bill seeks to address one of those harms, and that is around our reciprocal healthcare arrangements, which have made such a difference to people’s lives both here and across the EU. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) pointed out, 190,000 UK expats live in the EU and 27 million people hold an active European health insurance card, which covers about a quarter of a million treatments every year, but we are also talking about British citizens who travel or live in the EU to work and the 1,300 people who benefit from planned medical treatments in the EU under the S2 route.

I will turn first to the 190,000 British expatriates, mostly pensioners, living in the EU. Incidentally, 90% of them live in Ireland, Spain, France and Cyprus. They face a desperately worrying future. In the event of a deal, they will be covered by transitional arrangements until 2020, but in the event of a chaotic exit, with no deal and no transition, in just 135 days they could be left stranded, many of them with access only to very basic medical care. Some of them will be uninsurable and many will have no easy path to return to the UK.

The Minister will know that, as I mentioned to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms), 75%—€468 million of the total €630 million in 2016-17—of the cost of our reciprocal healthcare arrangement relates to pensioners. When he sums up, will the Minister please respond to the updated estimated cost of those pensioners having to return to the UK and the net effect on the NHS? The Health and Social Care Select Committee heard that the current average cost of treating a UK pensioner in Spain was €3,500, but the average cost of treating pensioners in the UK was £4,500, and again the discrepancy between the pounds and euros makes that even greater.

In the future, the costs associated with EHIC—£156 million—and the S2 route for planned medical treatments will be borne directly by the 50 million UK nationals who visit the EU every year, but those costs will not be distributed evenly. The costs will fall disproportionately on those with pre-existing medical conditions. They will be exceptionally hard hit. As we heard from the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), many individuals will be effectively uninsurable and unable to travel. Will the Minister tell us what clear advice the Government are giving to people with pre-existing medical conditions who are thinking of making travel arrangements after 29 March? Is he being explicit with them, and telling them that they need to check now whether they may find themselves left stranded without medical insurance in the event of our crashing out in a chaotic exit with no deal whatsoever?

I recognise and welcome the fact that the Bill gives the Minister power to put in place an equivalent scheme, but that scheme will have to involve a dispute resolution process. In the deal that is about to be published, has the Minister seen what that process would be? Another thing that he needs to be very clear about when he sums up the debate is that if we crash out with no deal and no transition, we will not be making these reciprocal arrangements with a single body; we will be making them with 27 different European states, three European economic area states, and Switzerland. Is it even conceivable that we could complete negotiations on that scale with
135 days to go? We need to be really clear with Members throughout the House, and to the public, about what that means, so that people can make plans accordingly. May I also ask whether the Minister is setting aside, within the contingency fund, a sum of money that we could use to assist British nationals who find themselves in difficulties on the wrong side of the channel in the event of no deal and no transition? Those are all important points about which we must be very clear with people.

Does the Minister agree that during the referendum campaign there were very many different versions of Brexit? The Brexit reality with which we are about to be presented is very different from the fantasy version that was presented during the campaign. People will remember the “easiest deal in history” and the “financial bonanza” that was presented during the campaign. People will remember, throughout the House, and to the public, about what

I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will bring my remarks to a close shortly. [Interruption.] I understand that you were merely coughing, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will continue.

Refrigerated warehousing and special air freight do not come cheap. The companies whom we met, represented by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, made it clear that they were already having to spend hundreds of millions of pounds on contingency planning. The Government have said that they intend to reimburse companies, but the smaller companies need to know how quickly they will be reimbursed, because they may have cash-flow issues. They need to know the details of how the scheme will work, but they simply do not have the information that would enable them to make plans for the future. I hope that the Minister will be very mindful of that.

As I said earlier, the simple truth is that the many versions of Brexit have very different implications for the NHS, for social care, for public health and for research. Once this deal is published, we will have an opportunity to set out what this means, but, most important, to set all the risks and benefits of the deal that is on offer for the NHS and social care. The Minister will be aware of the important principle of informed consent in healthcare. No one would dream of going into an operating theatre and having an operation without someone telling them what is involved and setting out the risks and benefits so that they could weigh them up for themselves. That is called informed consent, and without informed consent, there is no valid consent.

Let me say to the Minister that we are all being wheeled into the operating theatre for major constitutional, economic and social surgery without informed consent, and let me ask him please to consider how things will be 136 days from now, after we crash out with no deal and when the serious consequences of that start to unfold and unravel and hit real people’s lives. What will he be saying to his constituents and the House if we have proceeded without informed consent?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have now to announce the result of today’s deferred Division. In respect of the question relating to electricity and gas, the Ayes were 285 and the Noes were 223, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division list is published at the end of today’s debates.]

2.48 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is, as always, a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). She speaks with incredible knowledge and expertise in this area, which I will not even attempt to match.

It is nice, on a day of significant Brexit chattering and uncertainty, to be talking about something to do with Brexit which generally seems pretty consensual. The Bill is, of course, necessary to ensure the smooth transition from our current relationship with the EU to our future relationship. The Government have been very clear about their willingness to consider the continuation of the UK’s participation in reciprocal healthcare. As we have already heard today, there are 32 participating
countries in that framework, the other EU member states and all four nations in the European Free Trade Association. It is a mechanism to provide for the co-ordination—not, of course, the alignment—of separate national health systems, which means that provision under the scheme can differ from country to country.

There are four main routes for EU and EEA citizens to access healthcare in member states other than those in which they are ordinarily resident: the European health insurance card—EHIC—the S1 system for state pensioners, the S2 system for planned treatment, and the patients’ rights directive. UK nationals living, working, studying or visiting EU or EEA countries and Switzerland will have continued access to healthcare after 29 March 2019. That is a vital commitment.

The Government’s position is to seek a wider agreement with the EU that covers state pensioners retiring to the EU, with continued participation in the EHIC scheme and co-operation on planned medical treatment. The Bill would allow for the implementation of such an agreement. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) when talking about ex-pats summed up clearly why that is such an important issue for individuals who have lived here and paid their taxes here and moved abroad; they need to know this system will continue to be available to them.

There were approximately 27 million active UK EHIC cards in circulation in September 2017, including the one in my pocket. Of the 53 million visits made to the EU from the UK each year, and the 25 million visits from the EU to the UK, only around 1% result in an EHIC claim. I am glad this Bill establishes the basis for a new arrangement allowing the scheme to continue after 2020, subject, of course, to an agreement with the EU. There are 250,000 medical treatments each year and when abroad, regardless of how well we know the country in question, it can be quite frightening to find ourselves in need of medical treatment; there is enough to be thinking about without not knowing what our access to healthcare will be.

I had experience of that myself in Portugal on my stag-do. I will not go into the story as to why we ended up in a Portuguese hospital, but it involved a roof and a stag-do. I will not go into the story as to why we ended up in a Portuguese hospital, but it involved a roof and a stag-do. I look forward to concluding my speech and finding out more details about that later.

An odd place to start would be my constituency, where 20% of constituents do not have a passport, and therefore do not get the opportunity to travel and have any concerns about reciprocal healthcare arrangements. However, they do need to worry about the healthcare arrangements that are provided in this country. Any country that might wish to engage in reciprocal arrangements with us will no doubt be looking jealously at our health service, which I understand employs 1.5 million people, making it one of the five biggest organisations on the planet. Clearly, it is an incredible organisation. We are spending over £100 billion a year on it, so why would other countries not want to enter a reciprocal arrangement with us? We have a lot to offer.

There has been some question about what the Brexit deal will be and what the future might look like next year, when we leave the EU. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) has made this point a number of times: if you were to sit down with your iPad now with nothing better to do and try to book a flight for next year to Europe, you would have no difficulty doing so at all. We do not know what the arrangements are for international travel yet. We have not seen the detail of that, in terms of what has been signed and agreed, but we know planes will take off and will land in Europe and I think we are fairly confident that people will be able to get healthcare when they go to Europe and that there will be no unusual situation where ambulances drive up to one end of the border and hand a patient over. That is not likely to be the case, so let us bring a degree of practicality to the debate. That is what the Bill does: it is a practical Bill in order for us to make the necessary preparations because we are, of course, leaving the EU. It is necessary partly because 25% of Brits who travel abroad do not have holiday insurance. Perhaps they are taking a bit of a flyer and hoping that those reciprocal arrangements will be the safety net that protects them.
I have a particular concern because that 25% figure rises to 40% for 18 to 24-year-olds and 38% for those aged between 18 and 30. I am the father of two kids, aged 22 and 27. I think it is very unlikely that if they were travelling to Europe they would have the common sense to book travel insurance, despite protestations by their father. So I am hoping that we achieve those reciprocal arrangements, not least because my understanding is that nine of the 10 top holiday destinations abroad for Brits are in Europe—if it were not for New York, the top 10 would be entirely in Europe. So we are leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe.

Dr Wollaston: Does my hon. Friend accept that at the moment people do not need to have health insurance as they are covered by the EHIC? The fact is that they will need to have such insurance if we do not have a deal. People who travel thinking and believing that they are insured next year may find, if they have a serious medical emergency abroad, that they are completely wiped out by the medical costs. We need to be clear about that with people.

Eddie Hughes: I completely understand, and to a degree accept, that point, except that I perhaps have more faith than my hon. Friend in the ability of our ministerial team and Government to negotiate an agreement with Europe that will mean that those worries are allayed. I confidently believe that the arrangements will be very similar.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I want to speak briefly in support of the Bill. There are 190,000 UK expats living in other parts of the EU, many of whom are retired, as well as 50 million British citizens who apply to EU citizens when they are in the UK. Healthcare co-operation is therefore actively supporting business and tourism by removing a barrier to people’s life choices. Arguably the greatest beneficiaries of these arrangements are our citizens who live on the continent, many of whom are enjoying their golden years in the sun.

The framework put in place by the Bill will ensure that the Secretary of State has the necessary power to maintain or negotiate arrangements in any Brexit eventuality. One of my constituents recently emphasised the importance of having these arrangements. His grandmother, who is now over 80, lives alone in France. A few years ago, she had a car accident that left her seriously injured. She required an operation and spent over a month in hospital. That was followed up by time in a convalescent home. All that care would have cost a small fortune but, luckily for her, she enjoys healthcare under the European health insurance card S1 route. Access to that is fundamental to her and to the other 190,000 pensioners like her, particularly as their health needs may increase over time. The Bill should calm the anxieties of our citizens abroad. It will also save the taxpayer money. The Nuffield Trust has calculated that, if those pensioners had to return home for their treatment, it would cost the NHS between £500 million and £1 billion a year.

Similarly, continuing the European health insurance card scheme is crucial as it safeguards the 50 million UK nationals who travel throughout the European economic area every year. It is worth mentioning that this is not about the number of people who carry EHICs; it is about the stories behind them, because 250,000 medical incidents affecting UK tourists are resolved via the EHIC scheme and they include one of my constituents, who experienced at first hand the value of the cards when on a family holiday in Germany. Her husband was left seriously injured after being flung from a toboggan, leaving his shoulder quite literally in pieces. To her amazement, and despite the severity of the injuries, her husband was allowed on to the ambulance only once she had presented his EHIC. These sorts of accidents are quite common with many Brits choosing to travel to Europe to ski, which often leaves people—myself included, twice in recent years—in need of medical attention.

I welcome the Bill, as we have a long history of reciprocal healthcare arrangements in our country. UK and Irish citizens have been able to access healthcare in each other’s countries for the past 100 years—a long time before the European Union was established. The UK also has reciprocal healthcare arrangements with other parts of the world, including Greenland, the Faroes, the Balkans, Australia, New Zealand and many of our overseas territories. The Bill will allow the Secretary of State to continue to grow this network, and I hope that it will eventually lead to the global availability of free healthcare for British citizens, and to removing barriers to people looking to travel, work, study and live around the world.
travel to the EU on their holidays and on business every year, and they all need access to healthcare. Since 2004, they have been able to benefit from the European health insurance card, which has made it much easier for them to access medical care when travelling through the EU, and it is extremely important that we do all we can to ensure that our citizens can continue to benefit from easy access to healthcare, whether they are at home or overseas. I therefore welcome the Bill, and the fact that it gives us the ability to extend these provisions to other third countries.

Last year, I led a Westminster Hall debate on the wide array of consumer issues that would need to be dealt with in the Brexit negotiations. At that time, I felt that a lot of the focus was on the impact on business, and that not enough consideration was being given to the impact on consumers. I have been rereading the speech that I gave in that debate more than 12 months ago, and I am extremely pleased that the issues that I raised in it were then addressed by the Government’s White Paper before the summer. I believe that those points will now have made their way into the 500-page text that the Cabinet are looking at today. I am not going to comment on those 500 pages of text until I have seen them, because unlike some colleagues, I do not have magic reading glasses that allow me to read text that is not even available or to comment on it before I have even seen it. However, I will be looking out for the elements that affect individuals, consumers and patients, to ensure that they are covered in the deal. I believe that they will be, and the EHIC is just one of those issues.

It is important that we do not go over the top and promise that the EHIC can do things that it cannot do. For example, it does not cover repatriation, so anyone who has a crash on their skiing holiday would get emergency care under the scheme but they would not be covered for getting back to their home base. In my previous role as a Member of the European Parliament, I remember that we issued a press release every summer telling people not to forget their EHIC but also to think about whether they needed travel insurance as well. Members are completely right to say that, in a no-deal scenario, many other issues would face patients and that the most vulnerable people risk being the most exposed. If the cost of travel insurance does go up, it could be most challenging for them, but I am glad that Ministers are looking at that issue.

While the Health Ministers are in the Chamber, I should like to give them a big shout-out and thank them for certain other things. Somebody talked earlier about nurses. Nurse training is happening in my constituency. I know that the Minister for Health has previously talked about ensuring that there is additional funding for those entering the nursing profession after they have finished their qualification to ensure we recognise those in nursing areas where we need nurses most. I am glad that he has done that. I also want to say a big thank you today for the announcement from the NHS about diabetes monitors. That has been a major issue for some of my constituents. We must ensure that constant monitors, such as the one our Prime Minister wears, are available across the country. I was really pleased by today’s announcement. I want to say thank you very much to the NHS and to our Ministers and thank you for getting the devil that is in the detail of the Bill correct today.
We want to see this Bill go further and outline processes for the efficient collection of moneys in any such event. We also hope that the Bill can be used today which body he envisages being used to adjudicate going forward. Perhaps the Minister can advise us to thorough scrutiny, and that all regulations should be subject to the affirmative procedure in Parliament. We also have concerns about the protection of patient data, and we wish to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place in the Bill. We will look to address those concerns in Committee.

The Health Secretary is on record as saying with confidence that this is one part of the Brexit deal that is resolved. I welcome his confidence and that of the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) on this—I wish I had their confidence. However, the Secretary of State does offer the proviso that that is “so long as we land a good deal.”

That is surely the crux of the issue, given the current uncertainty about whether we will get a deal at all.

I hope the Minister is able to give some reassurances on this issue, because the failure to facilitate a reciprocal arrangement for healthcare would be catastrophic for UK citizens seeking healthcare routinely within the nations of the EU. The thought of 190,000 expats losing their right to free healthcare is unthinkible. As the Minister rightly said, UK citizens have paid their taxes all their lives, and they need and deserve the certainty of the right to free healthcare and of knowing that it is protected. That is something the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) was keen to support, and we agree with him. It is unthinkible that expats living in the EU should be reduced to the status of third country nationals in a queue for healthcare. Similarly, the 50 million visitors to the EU each year will need certainty, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) pointed out—I am sure the whole House is interested to hear more about his stag trip. Without a reciprocal agreement in place, costs for citizens overseas may well be prohibitive, and there are obvious implications for health insurance premiums.

We are also concerned about the impact on our NHS in the UK if expats need to return here for treatment. Our system is already having to cope with unprecedented demand, and the thought of adding to that is something we are concerned about. I reiterate the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), of how any future disputes will be adjudicated. The Prime Minister has ruled out the future involvement of the European Court of Justice, so we are concerned about this issue going forward. Perhaps the Minister can advise us today which body he envisages being used to adjudicate in any such event. We also hope that the Bill can be used to outline processes for the efficient collection of moneys owed to the UK under any future arrangements for reciprocal healthcare.

We look forward to addressing these concerns in Committee. We want to see this Bill go further and be used as an opportunity to strengthen reciprocal arrangements further and to provide for enhanced arrangements with other nations worldwide, in line with the UK’s ambition to extend its range of trading partners.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I would like to take advantage of his offer, but I would also like to highlight another issue. I do not wish to extend the competence of the Bill unduly, but it is an opportunity for us to look at the reciprocal health agreements we have with the overseas territories, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), and particularly with United Kingdom dependent territories—I am thinking here of the Channel Islands. Under the previous Labour Government, the reciprocal health agreement with Jersey was ripped up and terminated in 2009. Under the coalition agreement in 2011, it was reinstated. However, at present, there is no reciprocal health agreement with Guernsey, which is also responsible for Alderney and Sark. I ask the Minister to consider that during the passage of the Bill.

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that. Understandably, much of the debate today has focused on the EU element of the Bill, but he is quite right to recognise that the reciprocal element extends beyond the EU and particularly to Crown dependencies, overseas territories and countries such as Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. I am very happy to have those discussions with him.

My opposite number, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, raised a number of points, one of which was the impact on people with long-term conditions.
I agree that, without reciprocal healthcare, people with long-term conditions, including those who need dialysis, may find it harder to travel. This is the essence of why the Bill is necessary, so that we can implement a reciprocal arrangement with the EU or, failing that, with individual member states to support the travel arrangements of those with long-term conditions.

The hon. Gentleman also questioned the £66 million figure that I referenced in my speech, and I am happy to point out that that was in relation to the 2016-17 value of claims made by the UK to EU member states. He also asked about cost recovery more generally and, since 2015, we have increased identified income for the NHS under reciprocal arrangements by 40%, and directly charged income has increased by 86% over the same period. I mentioned the increased focus on that to my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), which I hope gives a signal of intent as to the direction of travel on cost recovery.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and my hon. Friend for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) spoke about the work of the devolved Assemblies and how we liaise with them. Indeed, I spoke with my Welsh counterpart just yesterday. In the other place, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health has been working closely with the devolved Assemblies, as have colleagues and officials in our Department. How we work with the devolved Assemblies is a pertinent point, and we are keen to continue that active dialogue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Sir Robert Syms) correctly identified the importance of the EHIC card and of inward tourism to the UK. The point about continuity was reinforced by my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) and for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) in their thoughtful contributions. It was also echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) when he highlighted the importance of taking a practical approach to how these arrangements apply.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) raised a number of detailed points, and I am happy to have continued dialogue with her on them, although I hope she will draw some comfort from recent quotes and legislative developments in a number of EU27 states. For example, the French Minister for European Affairs said, “France will do as much for British citizens in France as the British authorities do for our citizens.” France has legislation under way. The Spanish Prime Minister said, “I appreciate, and thank very much, Prime Minister May’s commitment to safeguarding those rights. We will do the same with the 300,000 Britons who are in Spain.”

Again, I hope the fact that we actually pay out more to the EU than we currently receive, and the fact that both nations benefit from a reciprocal arrangement, gives an idea of the starting point of the discussions. Like my hon. Friend, I would welcome it if that were done across the EU27 as a whole.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of dispute resolution, and the current arrangements between the UK and other member states require states to resolve differences, in the first instance, between themselves. That is the existing position that applies, but clearly it would be a matter for negotiation as to how a future UK-EU agreement might be governed. That is a cross-cutting issue; it is not one pertaining solely to this Bill.

It is clearly in the interests of the British public to ensure reciprocal healthcare, arrangements, similar to those currently in place, continue when we leave the EU, whether that happens through an agreement with the EU itself, as we very much want, or through individual arrangements with EU member states.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Just for clarification, is the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice still a red line in the sand?

Stephen Barclay: The issue in terms of the ECJ will be dealt with in other areas of the withdrawal agreement discussions. In the event of a deal, and in the event of no deal, it will be governed by the bilateral arrangements. I commend this Second Reading to the House, and I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the House in Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

HEALTHCARE (INTERNATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 4 December.
(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings 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.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

HEALTHCARE (INTERNATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS) 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 Healthcare (International Arrangements) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, I will take motions 6 and 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Credit Transfers and Direct Debits in Euro (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 9 October, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Electronic Money, Payment Services and Payment Systems (Amendment and Transitional Provisions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 9 October, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Have you or Mr Speaker received any notification from the Government that they intend to make a statement here on the outcome of the talks with the European Union? Rumours are widely circulating that the Prime Minister intends to hold a press conference at 9 o’clock this evening but not to address the House. Have you had any indication that the Government will actually address the democratic heart of the country?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have received no indication that the Prime Minister is coming to the House later today. I understand that there is expected to be a statement from the Prime Minister tomorrow. As Mr Speaker said earlier, he would have stood ready to allow a statement if one were requested.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Clearly, the business has finished early and there is plenty of time for the Prime Minister to come back to make a statement. Given that the press conference will be at 9 pm, the House could be suspended and then the statement could be made—this could even be up until 7 pm. Have you had any indication that the House could be suspended and we could have a statement from the Prime Minister on the matter of most importance to this country?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As I understand it, the House could be suspended if there is an indication that a statement was expected. However, as we said earlier, the Speaker made it clear that he would have allowed time for a statement but no request has been made, and, as I understand it, there will be a statement from the Prime Minister tomorrow.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Prime Minister is obviously pretty caught up with the Cabinet at the moment; the rumours are that she has got on to only the third of the Cabinet Ministers, so this could go on for a little time. However, we do have all the time up to 7 pm, which would give her time to come to the House and get the constitutional proprieties right on the most important thing to happen in this House for the future of this country in a long time. She would then be able to come to this House, because we would not have adjourned; we would have suspended to give her that opportunity to do the right thing by this House, which is to come to the House before she does the press conference and make a statement. So would it be in order for us to have a vote to suspend the House, thereby giving her that opportunity to do the right thing by our constitution?

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I entirely endorse the comments made by my hon. Friend, but may I also raise a concern with you? I just asked a question of the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), and it still appears the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government have not been informed about the status of these negotiations and these papers. So it is not just this House and this Parliament that the Government are trying to circumvent, but the other democratically elected Parliaments of the United Kingdom. Do you not agree that this is an extraordinary situation, which gives us another reason why this House should be suspended? The Prime Minister should come here and explain herself.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Let me just address what I think the gist of these points of order is. First, there are no grounds for suspension unless a request has been received and a statement is being asked for later. However,
the Adjournment debate can run until 7 pm and it can be up to the Government—[Interruption.] Order. I am trying to be helpful. It is possible for the Government at any time up to that point to say that they wish to make a statement. I hope that is helpful in informing the House of the current position.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the remarks you have just made. We need to convey to the Government our extreme unhappiness about what is going on. [Interruption.] I can hear comments about there always being unhappiness, but this is most serious. We have been made aware that the Government of Gibraltar have been briefed on what is in the withdrawal agreement. We hear from the UK Government about the respect that must be shown to the devolved institutions and about how they are partners together with the UK Government, but I can tell the House that, as I speak, the Administration in Edinburgh, the Scottish Government, have not been informed about what is in the arrangement between the UK and the EU. The Cabinet is due to reach agreement this afternoon and the Prime Minister is not taking the opportunity afforded to her to update the House, and this is being disrespectful in the extreme to this place and to the people of the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That was not really a point of order; it was more a point of frustration. I have given the House the maximum information about the options that are open. Those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the anxiety of the House about the current situation, and I am sure that will be conveyed. It is not my job to convey it, but obviously those on the Treasury Bench have heard it. As I said, Mr Speaker made it clear earlier that he was very happy to take a statement at any time. The Adjournment can run until 7 pm. The Government can make a statement at any point up until then.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. No Prime Minister has spent so many hours at the Dispatch Box answering questions and about whether you were in the Chamber earlier today. I can hear comments that the Prime Minister will then inform the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, that the Cabinet will meet, that the Prime Minister will then make a statement and there are still options open. As I have said, the concerns of the House have been expressed through these points of order and they have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. I say again that the Prime Minister will come to the House tomorrow to make a statement and there are still options open today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. I was merely saying what the options were, and the option does remain for a statement to be made if the Adjournment went on until 7 o’clock.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You helpfully clarified that the Adjournment could continue until 7 o’clock tonight, should the Government wish to come and make a statement. It may be that not everyone present has prepared a speech that is relevant to the Adjournment debate on police employer pension contributions that will take place, so would you allow some leniency, scope and flexibility in the contributions that Members might wish to make to that debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members can speak, but they have to speak to the subject of the debate. Their remarks must obviously be related to police employer pension contributions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I really think that we need to move on. I shall take two more points of order, and that is it.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I really appreciate the clarity you have given about the issues going up to the Adjournment debate at 7 pm and then 7.30 pm, but perhaps you could help me to understand what would happen should the House vote down the Adjournment motion? What would be the procedural consequence? Would it allow the House to continue its discussions after that point?

Madam Deputy Speaker: If the Adjournment is voted down after 7 o’clock, it will still adjourn. The House adjourns at 7.30 pm.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given the statement that Mr Speaker rightly made that the Cabinet will meet, that the Prime Minister will then inform the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, that that parliamentary precedent, which is generally agreed on across the House, moves forward and that a statement then comes to the House before any press conference, I wonder whether you could advise me, in your office as Deputy Speaker, whether that is fundamentally undermined by the fact that the Government of Gibraltar has been informed of the deliberations before the Cabinet has met and made a decision, contrary to the opinion given by the Speaker of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Madam Deputy Speaker: What the Government choose to tell the Government of Gibraltar is not a matter for me. As I have said, the concerns of the House have been expressed through these points of order and they have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. I say again that the Prime Minister will come to the House tomorrow to make a statement and there are still options open today.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) rose—
Madam Deputy Speaker: I shall take a final point of order.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think the bit that upsets quite a lot of Members is not that the Cabinet may go on for many hours—that is fully understood; it is the Cabinet’s job to govern—but that after that point it is important that the first next people to hear should surely be the Members of Parliament who will have to make a decision. It is the phase between the Cabinet and House, with the Government going to talk to the press, that is the problem for us. I fully understand that were the Cabinet to continue meeting till midnight tonight, it would probably be impossible for us to have a statement from the Prime Minister today, but as the Adjournment can go on until half-past 7 this evening, what is the last moment at which the Prime Minister could make herself available and at which we could be given notice that a statement could happen?

Madam Deputy Speaker: At 7 o’clock.

PETITIONS

The Boundary Commission and Heywood’s Identity

3.39 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I rise to present this petition, with 767 signatures, about retaining the proud name of Heywood in any redrawing of constituency boundaries.

The Boundary Commission review proposes to remove the name of Heywood from its new parliamentary constituency. This is an insult to a proud town, which has given us Julie Goodyear, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), not to mention its most famous son, Peter Heywood, for if he had not snatched the lighted torch from the hands of Guy Fawkes in 1605, none of us would be standing in this place today.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Heywood and Middleton,

Declares that Heywood is a proud town with a proud history, which has had a clear identity as a parliamentary constituency since 1185; further that the Boundary Commission proposes to remove the name of Heywood from the new parliamentary constituency.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Boundary Commission to restore the name of Heywood to the proposed title for the new constituency in which it will be located.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Access to Flash Glucose Monitoring in England

3.41 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I begin by declaring my interest as a type 2 diabetes sufferer? Today is World Diabetes Day, and I am presenting a petition on behalf of 1,418 citizens of Leicester. I come not just to present the petition, but to thank the Government who announced today that they were allowing everyone in England and Wales with type 1 diabetes to be able to have access to the Freestyle Libre flash glucose monitoring machine, which is similar to the one that the Prime Minister wears.

While warmly welcoming that decision, I still present this petition because it also affects those with type 2 diabetes. We do not have access to this particular form of monitoring and it is very important that everyone with type 2 diabetes—4.5 million people in the United Kingdom—should also be able to have this unit, rather than having to prick their fingers and to have their test done by removing blood.

A total of 1,480 people have signed the petition in Leicester, and 1,689 have signed in the rest of the country. I am glad that the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) is here to present his petition on behalf of his constituents. What the petition says is that the postcode lottery that did operate and that will continue to operate until April 2019 prevents people in Leicester and in 25% of the country from having access to this monitor. I hope that the Government will allow this access immediately, rather than waiting until April 2019.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom.

Declares that the unfair postcode lottery created by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) for access to Flash Glucose Monitoring (FreeStyle Libre) is detrimental to the health and emotional wellbeing of people with diabetes and those that care for people with diabetes; further notes that technology has been proved to be cost effective for many who are on intensive insulin therapy; further that it has been made available on prescription by the NHS and there is evidence to support its positive impacts; further that half of the country have now given access, but the other half have not; further that there is no reason why CCGs across the country should not make this life changing technology available to people with diabetes who could benefit in England.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the government to take immediate action with NHS England to make Flash Glucose Technology available on prescription for people with diabetes regardless of their address.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]
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The petition states:
The Petition of residents of Crawley,
Declares that the unfair postcode lottery created by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) for access to Flash Glucose Monitoring (FreeStyle Libre) is detrimental to the health and emotional wellbeing of people with diabetes and those that care for people with diabetes; further notes that technology has been proven to be cost effective for many who are on intensive insulin therapy; further that it has been made available on prescription by the NHS and there is evidence to support its positive impacts; further that half of the country have now given access, but the other half have not; further that there is no reason why CCGs across the country should not make this life changing technology available to people with diabetes who could benefit in England.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the government to take immediate action with NHS England to make Flash Glucose Technology available on prescription for people with diabetes regardless of their address.

And the petitioners remain, etc. [P002291]

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The point has been made that there are huge concerns about the Prime Minister going to the press in advance of coming to this House, and the Prime Minister should come to this House to make any announcements after Cabinet. In 1971, when the UK debated joining the European Economic Community, the House was allowed to run for an additional nine hours through the course of the evening after the moment of interruption at 10 pm, in order for the proper debate to take place. It was important then for the House to be allowed to have that additional time, because it was really important for the people to see that the debate was taking place.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I understand that it is your role and the role of Mr Speaker to protect the reputation of this House, and to ensure that the people out there are not laughing at us and are not concerned that the procedures of this House are stifling debate. Will you please let me know that you have considered this today?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): There is a lot of sympathy in the House for the hon. Lady’s point. I am sure that the Prime Minister would want to come to the House when there is something to say. The hon. Lady mentioned the year that the House was debating Britain going into Europe, but on that occasion it was already tabled that the House would sit later; nothing has been tabled today. Like everyone else, I am bound by the rules of the House and it is Members who vote on the rules of the House. All I can do is work with the rules as they are. I cannot create new rules, no matter how important the situation. The hon. Lady’s point has been taken on board and I am sure that people have listened. It is something to bear in mind for the future.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that you are guided by the rules, are there any procedures whereby the House could be suspended while we wait for the Prime Minister to come back and make a statement, given that a press conference has already been set for 9 o’clock? We are not a vassal state, but a sovereign Parliament, and we would like the Prime Minister to come here as soon as she has concluded her discussions with the Cabinet.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, the straightforward answer is no. I do not want to take more points of order on the same issue.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: If other points of order are on the same matter, we have already made a ruling. The decision has been taken, so I hope that this is about something different.

Mr Bone: I am sure it will be, Mr Deputy Speaker. [Interruption.] Yes, it will have to be now. I just wanted to be clear—it is just a point of information, Sir. [Interruption.] Oh, all right, let’s do a point of order—that would be better, wouldn’t it? On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it correct that the Government must not make a major policy announcement to the media first but have to make it to the House first?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is absolutely right. I would expect the convention that this House comes first. That is what I would always say. I will never shy away from that, and neither would anybody else who occupies this Chair. This House should always know first.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Notwithstanding this very important issue—I wholeheartedly support my colleagues in pushing for the Prime Minister to come to the House—I am obviously concerned, as you will appreciate, being a north-west MP yourself, that the House were to rise early. Members might inadvertently miss the opportunity to come to the reception in Strangers Dining Room to mark the 50th anniversary of the continuous at-sea deterrent. I wonder if there is a way by which, perhaps through your good offices, I might be able to inform Members here in the House, and some who might be watching on the TV screens, that they can come down to Strangers Dining Room—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Woodcock, thank you for the point of information. It is certainly not a point of order.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you could use your good offices to inform Members of this House how we could perhaps obtain tickets to the press conference at 9 o’clock this evening so that Members of this House can use their democratic right to question the Prime Minister on this deal?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We all know the rules of the House, and I have explained what will happen and what the procedures are. Come on, now.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that most people would be astonished that two apparently important debates that were timetabled for six hours collapsed after about two and a half hours. There have been reports, which some may think credible, that the Government Whips have sought to engineer that situation deliberately.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am running out of patience with the points of order now. Can I just say that that was up to Members of this House on all sides? Please do not put the complaint to me. Members should have spoken if they wanted to keep the debate going. I am sorry, but I think we ought to realise that it was up to Members to keep the business going until 7 o’clock, the moment of interruption. Right, let us move on.
Police Employer Pension Contributions

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mike Freer.]

3.52 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is good to see such widespread interest in the House in the matter of policing and pensions, and the impact on police numbers. I want to begin by saying that I share the House’s frustration that we have almost four hours in which we could deal in plenty of time with the substantive matter of the agreement that has been struck over the past 24 hours.

However, turning to the subject before us, this debate is about the impact of changes to employer pension contribution rates on our policing service. These changes, of course, have broader implications for other public services, but this afternoon I want to concentrate on policing. My contention is quite simple: against a backdrop of steep cuts in police numbers and rising violent crime levels, it would be intolerable if the pension changes announced by the Government resulted in another round of cuts to police numbers around the country.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this debate actually has much wider implications with regard to the issue of recruitment to the police force? If police officers see that their pensions are going to be affected by what the Government are proposing, fewer people will apply to join the police force because they see no future in public service where they are not rewarded with a decent pension, and that will affect the constabularies in every single area of England and Wales.

Mr McFadden: My right hon. Friend makes a strong point. Of course, he has many years of experience in this, as the former Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Greater Manchester police and the deputy mayor for policing, my noble Friend Baroness Beverley Hughes, have raised real concerns about the additional costs of police pensions and the insufficiency of the precept to meet them. Further to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), Baroness Hughes has particularly pointed out that the impact on recruitment will also affect the plans that Greater Manchester police had to increase diversity in the force. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ministers ought to be mindful of that concern?

Mr McFadden: I absolutely agree; this has a number of implications.

My central point is that the public should not be asked to accept that a consequence of this is a further round of cuts to police numbers; the cuts to police numbers in recent years have already gone far too far. We cannot responsibly allow the public’s freedom to go about their daily business to continue to be eroded as is happening at the moment.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The police risk life and limb to protect the public. They deserve nothing but the best, including a secure income in retirement. With crime rising rapidly and 2,000 police officers cut in the west midlands, does my right hon. Friend agree that it simply cannot be right that the police service has to fund police pensions, because the consequences of that will be further police officers being lost on the one hand and crime continuing to rise on the other?

Mr McFadden: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He shares my contention that the public and police should not be asked to bear the brunt of this.

For many years, the Government have claimed that there is no link between the number of police on the streets and the levels of crime, but this week we had an important change in direction when the Home Secretary said that he now accepted the link between crime levels and police numbers. After years of the Government denying it, the Home Secretary this week finally acknowledged the importance of police numbers in fighting crime when he said:

“I think actually police numbers have to be an important part of the solution. Let’s not pretend that it’s not.”

I am grateful for that admission. It is long overdue. Let us be honest—if it was a Labour Government that had cut police numbers by more than 20,000 against a backdrop of rising violent crime, the Conservatives would not be saying that police numbers are not part of the issue; they would be screaming about it from the rooftops.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The police budget has been cut, so how can the Government say that they are giving the police the resources to increase numbers and make the job attractive? I visited a police station a couple of weeks ago, and police there were being asked to act as medics and assess prisoners who had mental difficulties. That is the sort of job they are being asked to do now, and it must have a demoralising effect on the police.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend is right that as time changes, the pressures on the police change, and the things they are asked to do are changing.

The Home Secretary’s admission this week is hugely important. Now that he has admitted that we need more police officers, it is up to the Home Office to secure the cash from the Treasury needed to deliver that pledge.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I wholeheartedly agree with what my right hon. Friend is saying. I have spent time over recent weeks behind the scenes with South Wales police, as part of the police service parliamentary scheme, and I have been directly the pressures they are facing and heard the concerns about their pensions, pay and conditions. To be fair to the Minister, I know that he has been listening carefully to concerns about funding for Cardiff in particular.

Does my right hon. Friend share my dismay that the permanent secretary at the Home Office yesterday confirmed that the Home Office had nearly half a billion extra over the last two years to deal with no-deal preparations for Brexit, and that he was putting in a bid for hundreds of millions of pounds of new funding just to deal with Brexit, not to pay for our police?
Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It confirms my view, after two years on the Brexit Select Committee, that new implications of this decision unfold every week that we did not know about—in full, at least—at the time of the referendum.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this Adjournment debate. This week, a chief constable said that police “may no longer be able to provide anything but the most basic services to the most vulnerable sectors of our community”. Does he agree that that must be a wake-up call for the Government to ensure that resources and funding are available?

Mr McFadden: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Several chief constables have issued similar warnings about their capacity to give the public the service that they expect. This also has major implications for police morale because officers want to do a good job and to serve the public to the best of their ability.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): In Durham, since 2010, we have seen a reduction of 400 in the number of police officers. With these cuts, Durham is going to lose a further 30 police officers. It is officially an outstanding force, but crime is going up. It is fair to say that the general public are going to say, “Has austerity actually ended?” They will not be thinking about pensions and so on. They will be thinking about the lack of bobbies on the beat. It would be fair for them to assess that austerity has not ended.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There is simply no point in the Prime Minister promising to her conference, and to the public through her conference, that austerity has ended and then bringing in a set of changes that ends up with us seeing fewer police on the streets.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Was not this crisis not only predictable, but predicted? Under the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), not only in her role as Prime Minister, but in her previous role as Home Secretary, police forces—I regret to say that the then chief constable of West Midlands police was enthusiastic—cut the number of experienced police officers savagely and lost a huge strength in that regard. At the time, we said, “How are you saving money? This money will fall on the pensions scheme.” We were told, “That is not West Midlands’ problem”, but that has come back to haunt them. At the time, the Home Secretary and the Home Office were the ones encouraging chief constables to do that. Now people on the streets of the west midlands are paying the price.

Mr McFadden: The price is being paid on the streets of the west midlands, the streets of Greater Manchester, the streets of Durham, the streets of Cardiff and the streets represented by everyone who has made interventions.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that, where the fire and rescue authority has amalgamated with the police, such as in North Yorkshire, the risk has been spread even further, to our fire service?

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I said in my opening sentences, the issue affects many public services. I have focused particularly on the police in this debate, but Members could be having a similar debate about a number of other public services.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): In Scotland, things are the same. The issue exists across the country. Far too much emphasis has been put on Brexit, but this is bread and butter stuff; this is the police who are looking after our streets. So many children and young people in London—supposedly the heart of the UK—are getting murdered on the streets because of the lack of police numbers. Those young people should be growing up and getting a pension, not fighting. Start getting the police on the street again.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the level of crime and I will come on to that issue.

There is no point in the Home Secretary publicly saying that we need more officers and then loading an increased pension burden on to police forces that could result in precisely the opposite outcome from the one he wants to see. Just last week, the Public Accounts Committee published a report that sets out starkly what has happened to policing in recent years. Total police staffing numbers in England and Wales have dropped from a peak of 244,000 in March 2010 to 200,000 in March this year. Within that overall number, police officer numbers—this is probably the figure our constituents are most concerned by—have dropped from 143,734 in 2010 to 122,404 this year. That is a loss of more than 21,000 officers from our streets and communities. Police community support officers are down by around 40%. Other police staff are down by 21%, from around 80,000 to 68,000. Whether it is in civilian staff, PCSOs or the uniformed officers on our streets, we have seen hugely steep cuts over the past eight years.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Those figures include the 500 police officers lost to the Cleveland police authority since 2010. Despite adaptations, such as the privatisation of back-room services and the sharing of services with Durham constabulary colleagues, the police are still feeling the squeeze. The people of Hartlepool have told me that they prioritise bobbies on the beat. We are not going to get them any time soon if these cuts continue.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

The reason for these cuts in numbers, which I have read out to the House, is a steep cut in Government funding to the police. In this financial year, police forces around the country will receive 30% less, in real terms, in Government grant than they received in 2010-11. In total, taking into account the local precept, police forces’ funding has been cut by 19%.

Those cuts do not fall in a uniform manner, because some forces are more reliant than others on Government grant, and some get more help from the precept. For a force such as my own in the west midlands, where Government grant income comprises a very large part of the police budget, the impact of the cuts is even...
crime is not uniform in its effect. Neighbourhood teams
only of public safety, but equality. Let us not forget that
providing reassurance on the ground and gathering
police teams—often one per local authority ward—
were a visible reminder to those most at risk of crime
that the state was there for them, on their side trying to
protect them. Conversely, when cuts come, these teams
are the ones that take the hit. The impact is not only on
public safety, but inequality.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Police
officers in West Yorkshire police have said to me that,
given the cumulative effect of the pay squeeze, funding
cuts and resource constraints, the pensions issue is the
straw that broke the camel's back and they are considering
voluntarily leaving the police force for what they consider
to be better employment. Does my right hon. Friend
agree that this might be the straw that broke the camel's
back?

Mr McFadden: I think it is tragic if the state spends
money training good police officers who end up, for
the reasons that my hon. Friend has set out, leaving
the force and embarking on another career.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful
to my right hon. Friend for this engaging Adjournment
debate. He will be interested to hear that in Scotland we
have the lowest number of police officers in a decade,
and a £200 million shortfall in the next few years, with
the Justice Minister saying that police numbers are no
longer a priority. This is happening in Scotland as well
as across England.

Mr McFadden: I do not know what the Minister in
Scotland has said, but I welcome the admission from the
Home Secretary this week that police numbers
matter, that they are important and that they are part of
the solution. I contend that, having said that, the Home
Office now needs to deliver.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab) rose—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)
rose—

Mr McFadden: I would like to make some progress.
The first part of the picture that I am setting out
is clear. We have far fewer police officers than we did—
2,000 fewer in my force, and more than 20,000 fewer
across the country. That has, inevitably, resulted in the
police being able to do less. Last month, Dave Thompson,
the chief constable of my force in the west midlands,
said:

"Core aspects of policing—such as answering calls, attending
emergencies, investigating crime, bringing offenders to justice and
neighbourhood policing—are being pushed beyond sustainability".

Beyond sustainability—that is the verdict of one of the
country's most senior and respected police officers.
That is the impact of the funding and police officer
numbers that I have set out.

Which parts of policing bear the biggest brunt? Often,
it is neighbourhood policing that does so. By 2010, after
years of investment, a comprehensive network of
neighbourhood policing teams had been painstakingly
built up. The investment had gone in and officers had
been recruited, and the result was dedicated, visible
police teams—often one per local authority ward—
providing reassurance on the ground and gathering
priceless local intelligence. They were an instrument not
only of public safety, but equality. Let us not forget that
crime is not uniform in its effect. Neighbourhood teams
were a visible reminder to those most at risk of crime
that the state was there for them, on their side trying to
protect them. Conversely, when cuts come, these teams
are the ones that take the hit. The impact is not only on
public safety, but inequality.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to my right hon.
Friend for giving way. He will be aware that the Civil
Nuclear Constabulary backfills for armed police offers
all over the United Kingdom. The CNC is awaiting an
equality impact assessment to have its pension age
reinstated. The offer it has made will cost the Treasury
no money whatever and all it is waiting for is that
equality impact assessment. So the pressure is across
the whole of our police. From our uniformed and plain
clothes officers to those officers who backfill at the
most essential level, they are being let down by the
Government.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a very good
point about the ripple effect of the loss of numbers
throughout other related services.

In evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, the
police and crime commissioner for Devon and Cornwall
described the effect on public confidence of the cuts I
have set out:

"at the moment in my community I know that our communities
do not feel safe. We have got public confidence reducing".

The chief constable of Durham police set out starkly to
the same Committee the contrast between the public's
desire for visible neighbourhood policing and the reality
of not being able to deliver it. He told the Public
Accounts Committee:

"The problem with listening to people is that they want
neighbourhood policing, which we can't give them because we
can't afford it."

That is not a situation that falls from the sky. It was not
the situation pertaining in 2010. When we left office, we
had put in place a comprehensive network of community
neighbourhood policing teams which provided the visible
presence we know our constituents want to see.

I repeat that this is an issue of equality, too. When the
police retreat to become more of a rapid response
service and less of a neighbourhood service, it is working-
class communities and people on low incomes who are
at the sharpest end.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The police and
crime commissioner for Cheshire recently wrote to me
and the other MPs in the area stating that cuts of
£60 million have already been imposed, with a further
£12 million of cuts proposed going forward. That is
250 officers taken from the frontline.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.
The point I am making is that the effect of this is not
uniform in all parts of the country. My contention is
that ensuring adequate police numbers is a progressive
cause. It confers freedom on those who cannot afford to
move house to get away from the problem. It provides
help where it is needed most. Conversely, when it is not
there, it is those who need help most who lose out.

For a time the Government claimed that there was
nothing to worry about, because cuts in police numbers
were not resulting in higher crime. Well, no longer. In
the west midlands over the past year, violence against
the person was up 21%, sexual offences up 23%, robbery up 22%, possession of weapon offences up 17% and knife crime up 18%. Nationally, homicides were up 14%, robbery up 14% and knife crime up 12%. The toll of knife crime, in particular, has horrified the country. Night after night, we hear of young lives brutally and senselessly cut short. Just last week, in the midst of a horrendous series of stabbings in our capital city of London, the Evening Standard pictured two of the victims on its front page. They were aged just 15 and 17. These were the faces of boys, not men; children killed in the most awful way. This has happened far too often on our streets. I am sure that all of us—on whichever side of the House—would agree that combating the upsurge in knife crime is a national cause of the utmost urgency.

The Minister may say that policing is not the sole answer, and I accept that. Clearly, there needs to be a further expansion of schemes, such as the early youth intervention scheme, that seek to tackle the root causes. Money for that scheme was distributed earlier this week, including some to my force in the west midlands, and I welcome that. However, if policing is not the sole answer, it is certainly an essential part of it, and we are going to need adequate numbers of police officers to get on top of this national emergency.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making an extremely effective speech. He referenced, in particular, the upsurge in knife crime in London. Is he aware that Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, has written to the Prime Minister setting out that the extra pension costs, which my right hon. Friend has rightly sought to draw to the House’s attention, could affect these numbers further, are the origin of the changes to the pension scheme, which could affect these numbers further, are two changes in what is called the discount rate for calculating pension liabilities. The effect of the changes in the discount rate has been to increase the liabilities for employers—in other words, to increase their costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) just quoted the potential impact on London. According to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, the changes to pension costs across the country could mean that they have to find another £165 million next year, rising to £417 million the year after. By way of comparison, that is the same amount as the total budget for West Yorkshire police, which is the fourth biggest police force in England.

Mr McFadden: Those are shocking numbers, both financially and in the potential impact on police numbers. As I said, it is simply intolerable to expect the public to cope with the consequences if they unfold in that way.

It is in those twin contexts—falling police numbers and rising violent crime, including a particular emergency relating to knife crime—that we must consider police resources. The origin of the changes to the pension scheme, which could affect these numbers further, are two changes in what is called the discount rate for calculating pension liabilities. The effect of the changes in the discount rate has been to increase the liabilities for employers—in other words, to increase their costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) just quoted the potential impact on London. According to the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, the changes to pension costs across the country could mean that they have to find another £165 million next year, rising to £417 million the year after. By way of comparison, that is the same amount as the total budget for West Yorkshire police, which is the fourth biggest police force in England.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has graphically set out the potential impact on a smaller police force such as Gwent. For my force in the west midlands, the commissioner and chief constable estimate that the extra costs from these pension changes could be around £22 million over the next two years. If these costs came from their budgets alone, the impact would be around 450 officers lost. That would be on top of the 2,000 that we have already lost. As I said to the Minister at the beginning of the debate, expecting the public to accept reductions of this magnitude in force levels after the cuts that have taken place over the past eight years would be intolerable.

Rachael Maskell: Julia Mulligan, the Conservative police and crime commissioner in North Yorkshire, wrote to me yesterday to highlight how for her police force, the £1.6 million to be cut in 2019-20 and the £4 million in 2020-21, on top of the £10 million savings that also have to be made, will mean that 30 officers will be lost immediately and then another 80 the following year. How can that be sustainable?

Mr McFadden: It is not sustainable, which is why leading chief constables have said that forces are already stretched beyond sustainability.

I turn now to how the changes might be paid for. The Budget allocated no extra money for local policing, but it did allocate extra funds for national counter-terrorism work, which I welcome. Of course, it is an essential part of protecting the public—we are all aware of the grave terrorist threat facing the country, so we all support extra funds for this essential counter-terrorism work—but it is not a substitute for the local neighbourhood policing that all our communities need on an all-year-round basis.

In evidence to the Treasury Select Committee on Monday 5 November, shortly after the Budget, the Chancellor implied that the Treasury would meet the extra costs of the pension changes. He said:

“In 2018 the Government decided that it was necessary to reduce the scope discount rate still further but on that decision we decided that the Treasury would absorb the additional cost. We have added a sum to the reserve and Departments will be reimbursed for the additional costs of the 2018 scope change.”

When asked if that would be for every year ongoing, the Treasury official accompanying the Chancellor at that evidence session said:

“It is actually for every year.”

On the face of it, that sounds as though the Government are ready to compensate Departments for the extra costs incurred. I hope the Minister will address this when he sums up, because if that is the case, it will be warmly welcomed by chief constables, the public and Members on both sides of the House.

The picture is not really that clear though, because in response to an urgent question on Tuesday 6 November, the Minister for Policing did not say that the money would come from the reserve and go through Departments. In response to a question from me, he said that
“it is my intention to work through the issue and come to the House in early December with a funding settlement that works.”—[Official Report, 6 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1387.]

He also said that the outcome of the question of where these extra costs would fall would be decided in the comprehensive spending review. These two statements appear to be in contradiction: either the Treasury will fund it, or the issue is not settled and will be settled, or not, in the CSR.

To add to the confusion, a written answer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 9 November read:

“Budget 2018 confirmed additional funding for expected costs in excess of the level envisaged at Budget 2016. Government will review police spending power and further options for reform at the provisional police funding settlement in December.”

I hope the Minister can clear this up. Has the Budget set aside further funds for the police to cover these costs, so that the fears of chief constables about their impact need not come to pass, or as he has implied, is the matter undecided and to be settled in the CSR? It cannot be both: either it has been settled, or it has not. What is the correct understanding that the House should have of the financial position?

I want to deal with one more issue that often comes up in these debates: the issue of reserves. During last week’s urgent question, there were several references to these reserves, the implication being that there was a large unused pot of cash sitting there, ready-made to deal with such situations. My own force in the west midlands has publicly set out the position on reserves. It does have reserves, but they are there to deal with issues such as capital costs, the self-insurance of vehicles, protective equipment, major incidents and so on, and the West Midlands force is already committed to running down these reserves at around £20 million per year. The capital and budget reserves will be gone completely by 2020, so this money is already committed and not available to meet the pension costs. In a couple of years, all that will remain will be reserves for essentials such as civil unrest, terrorist attacks and the self-insurance of vehicles.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Whether we are talking about local government or any other form of government, reserves can only be spent once. Anyone in local government will confirm that. If there are any surpluses, they are needed for emergencies. We take up these issues with the Minister, but when I asked him a question the other day, the only answer I got was “Well, you voted against it.” That is no answer. I can tell the Minister that we voted against it because there was not enough in the first place.

Mr McFadden: My hon. Friend has made an important point about reserves. One thing is clear in any budgeting exercise: the same money cannot be spent twice.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a very persuasive case. The police and crime commissioner for my region, Thames Valley, is a member of the governing party rather than my party, but he wrote to me saying:

“During the debate the Minister may say that Police service can afford to meet this additional pension cost from our reserves, but this is simply not true and should be refuted. We already have plans to use these, and cannot afford a further withdrawal to fund these police officer pension costs.”

Is that not exactly my right hon. Friend’s point?

Mr McFadden: It is exactly the same point. The Government cannot expect reserves which—as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham)—are there to cover one-off costs, and which, in most cases, are already committed, to be used also to fund ongoing pension liabilities that will grow year on year.

Policing faces a desperately difficult situation. Violent crime is rising, and a national crisis of knife crime is unfolding. That has to be a top priority for the Government. We have police forces saying that they cannot do what would have been routinely expected of them a few years ago, and we have some forces saying that they cannot respond in person to certain types of crime. All the while, as funds from central Government funds are cut, the public are being asked to pay more and more for all this through rising precept levels. In other words, the public are paying more and getting less from their police service. That cannot be right, and it is the Government’s duty to protect the public. It is bad for police morale, because the police want to do a good job, and it is not a good deal for the public.

No wonder confidence in the police’s ability is being hit. I believe that we need a change of direction, a halt to the cuts in police numbers, and an acceptance that it is a right of citizenship, wherever people live, to be protected by an adequate level of policing. My contention throughout the debate has been that this is not just a matter of public protection, but a matter of equality as well.

The pension changes that have been announced, should they all be loaded on to existing force budgets, will exacerbate the problems that we now face, and will make adequate levels of policing even harder to achieve. We cannot allow further cuts in police numbers to happen. The Minister and his Department must work with the Treasury to make sure that the changes are fully funded, so that the police can get on with the job we want them to do, which is protecting the public and ensuring that our constituents can live their lives and go about their business free from the fear of crime.

4.28 pm

Ves Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Let me begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) on securing this important Adjournment debate. Let me also express my view, which I think is widely held—certainly among Labour Members—on how outrageous it is that while the Cabinet is making a decision that has the potential to affect this country for generations to come, it is the reported intention of the Prime Minister to make a statement to the press immediately after—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.**
Wes Streeting: Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker; I just wanted to make the point at the outset that my constituents will be appalled that this House is adjourning about three hours early.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am being very good, and I am going to keep this debate going, but these are the rules of the House. They are not my rules; they are rules that we have all agreed to, and the fact is that those are the rules. We have to work within the rules, and as much as everybody is disappointed, the rules are there; they are made by Members, so please do not complain about the rules that have been introduced.

Wes Streeting: I accept that, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am certainly not criticising the Chair for enforcing the rules.

Wes Streeting: I would never knowingly criticise myself, Mr Deputy Speaker, and you will be pleased to know that my constituents care about and raise with me far more than Brexit the issue of policing and in particular the consequences of Government changes to employer national insurance contributions and what that will mean for the funding of policing in my constituency and every other community up and down the country, because, as was stated in the excellent opening speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East, the consequence of increasing employer contributions will be a cost on police forces of an entirely unexpected and unplanned £165 million for 2019-20, and, as has been stated, that employer pension contribution liability will rise over time, so by the time that we get to 2020-21 the liability will be more like £420 million.

Money, as we know, does not grow on trees, and those responsible for managing police budgets and resources and making sure the budget is properly deployed to keep our constituents and country safe will be faced with an invidious choice. Of course they will want to make the right contributions to people’s pensions, but, as the National Police Chiefs Council has warned, the reality is that this could amount to the loss of a further 10,000 police officers right across the country, with every police force in this land being affected.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I apologise for missing the opening of this debate as I had a clash of business. In Humberside, we have seen police numbers rising in the past couple of years, but these changes would reverse that, and our chief constable has issued a very stark warning. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is completely unacceptable for these changes to be loaded on to police authorities? I make it very clear in this Chamber to the Minister that if this continues, I will vote against the police grant when it comes before the House next year, as I did between 2010 and 2015.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful for that intervention. I have known the hon. Gentleman for many years, including before I was elected to this place, in my previous role as president of the National Union of Students, and I know that when he says he is prepared to vote against his own Government he genuinely means it, not out of disloyalty to his party, but out of loyalty to the interests of his constituents and our country.

I could make the point that the Government Benches are almost entirely empty, but we know that that would be unfair because Adjournment debates are very rarely well attended and this one is better attended than most. But the truth is that Government Whips know that, even in parliamentary prime time, in debates about police budgets and employer pension contributions in particular, they have to struggle and strong-arm to get loyal Back Benchers in to defend the indefensible. Conservative Members know this is an indefensible position and that the consequence of these changes to employer pension contributions will be to cost police numbers in their constituencies, and which constituency MP in their right mind would, no matter what the size of their majority and however secure they might feel about their own electoral prospects, want to come here to defend police cuts that will affect public safety in their own constituencies? No one wants to do that; it is not why we come into politics.

We must see the budgetary pressures presented by changes to employer pension contributions in the context of what has happened to policing budgets more generally. The hon. Gentleman mentioned police numbers in Humberside, and we do not have a happy situation in my city either—our capital city. The Metropolitan police have had to grapple with budget cuts amounting to more than £1 billion. Ministers stand at the Dispatch Box and in Westminster Hall debates and try to justify their budget decisions. They try to pass the buck by blaming the Mayor of London for the police cuts, but the truth is that when central Government are cutting funding to local policing on the scale that they have done, there is only so much that Mayors and police and crime commissioners can do to offset the impact of those cuts.

The Home Secretary has finally acknowledged that cuts have consequences, and we are seeing those consequences in the rising violent crime in my constituency, across our city and across the country. The Government consistently attack the Mayor of London and try to make this a party political issue, but the facts speak for themselves. It is not just in Labour-led cities that violent crime is rising; it is rising in the leafy Tory-led shires. Violent crime has doubled in counties such as Cambridgeshire and Norfolk in the past three years. People do not have to be experts to understand the obvious: if there are fewer police on the streets to catch criminals and deter criminal activity, crime will rise. This applies not only to violent crime but to motor vehicle crime, for example, and it is leading to people feeling less safe and secure in their communities. It is changing people’s way of life. They do not want to go out of their homes or run errands of an evening because they are afraid of being mugged or attacked. That is the reality.

Every time I speak on policing in this House and publish the video on my Facebook page or on Twitter, it goes viral because people are really concerned about this. They cannot understand it. As one now former Conservative councillor in my borough told me, they cannot understand why any Government would cut policing to this extent. Before the local elections this year, even a Conservative councillor told me that Conservative voters were saying, “We know there are difficult choices to be made; we expect the Government to be tightening their belt, but we do not expect a Conservative Government to cut policing in the way they have.”
Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech, and he has talked about the attitude of his constituents in north-east London. Those concerns are shared in north-west London. I have lived in my constituency all my life, and I cannot remember a time before now when there was gun crime on the streets of Harrow. In the past 12 months, we have found ourselves in the unprecedented situation of having two significant incidents of gun crime. That is unparalleled.

Wes Streeting: I am really grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I say without any prejudice towards inner London that, in reality, inner London has always had to grapple with violent crime. For MPs in boroughs such as Lambeth and Lewisham, gun crime, knife crime and gang crime have always been part and parcel of their work as constituency MPs. We know that there are problems concentrated in inner cities. That is an unfortunate fact of life, and it is one that we are working really hard to try to tackle. Frankly, no one should have to tolerate violent crime, wherever they live. My hon. Friend has just mentioned suburban London. My constituency borders the county of Essex, and I did not expect to see these levels of knife crime and violent crime there when I was elected to this place three years ago.

At Prime Minister’s questions today, I referred to an awful incident, which I would actually not associate with the police cuts, but I would draw to the Minister’s attention the stabbings and the gang crime in my constituency, as well as the county lines activity. Young people are being actively groomed at school gates. They are being identified because of their vulnerability and because they are the kids that are falling behind at school, and they are being groomed to run drugs across the country. We need police on our streets to deal with this. It is not just about grabbing people and nicking them; it is about the intelligence that community policing provides. It is about intelligence gathering and relationship building. It is about building trust so that people will come forward and speak to the police. All that is put at risk by the impact of the cuts to police budgets and police numbers. Given that that is the overall context, it is totally unacceptable to throw on top of that these changes to employer pension contributions, which are adding to the budgetary pressures.

To his credit, the Mayor of London has tried, with the resources he has available, to stem the tide of police cuts. Sadiq Khan has put in £140 million to fund 1,000 police officers, who would otherwise not be there. That has come at the cost of diverting into the policing budget money that the Greater London Authority gathers through business rates. It has also come at a cost to my constituents and to residents right across our capital city, who are paying more through their precept for policing.

It is so difficult to have a conversation about this with voters on the doorstep—this applies to council tax generally, by the way. I knock on people’s doors, and they say really clearly, “Hang on a minute. How is it that my local services are getting worse and there are fewer police officers on the street? My precept is going up—I am paying more. Why aren’t we getting more police?” That is a perfectly reasonable question. I have to explain to my constituents something I think is unjustifiable, which is that the Mayor of London is having to put up their precept because he is doing his best to stem the tide of cuts from central Government.

This is a repeat pattern of behaviour: central Government make decisions here and pass the buck to local decision makers, who are responsible for implementing the cuts.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful speech. Does he agree that it is not just in London that there is this deeply familiar pattern of deep cuts to police budgets, consequent cuts in police numbers and consequent rises in crime? Crime is getting ever more complex. The police are having to deal, as he said, with county lines issues and drugs issues more broadly—the use of new psychoactive substances, which are spreading throughout many of our communities—and precepts are having to be put up to try to stem some of these cuts. Is my hon. Friend surprised, as I am, that 1,600 officers and staff have lost their jobs in Wales over the past 10 years of Conservative and Conservative-led coalition Governments? That is deeply damaging to the ability of the police to deliver effective policing. I am sure that he agrees that it is completely unacceptable for this additional burden now to be placed on policing.

Wes Streeting: That is a powerful, well-made point, and it really does emphasise that this is a UK-wide problem and a common experience in a diverse range of communities up and down the country. It is so difficult to tell constituents that their taxes are rising, while their services are getting worse. It will be even more difficult to say that there will be fewer police officers on the streets of my constituency because the Government have changed some pension rules. My constituents will wonder what on earth the Government are playing at.

The Chancellor managed to find 500 million quid here, 500 million quid there and 500 million quid virtually everywhere to get a few good, cheap headlines the day after the Budget to create the illusion that the Government are putting money back into public services, even though we know that these sums were largely one-off grants for, as he so badly put it, the nice little extras. What I found most astonishing was that, even as the Chancellor, like Father Christmas a few months early, was sprinkling money across Departments, he did not find a single penny for policing. I genuinely found that astonishing; it suggests that the Treasury is out of touch—in fact, what it is doing with these rules, given the impact on police budgets, tells me that it is out of touch.

I am sure that I am not alone in having policing and crime as the No. 1 concern in my constituency. As I said at the outset, this place is understandably focused on Brexit and its generational consequences for years to come, but the discussion around dinner tables in my constituency tonight is more likely to be about crime and community safety, particularly given recent events. My constituents will be horrified at the way the Treasury is conducting itself in relation to these pension changes and the resources it puts into policing.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he is being extremely generous with his time. I put it to him that it is not true that the Treasury is out of touch on this; I think it knows exactly what it is doing. It is not just the Treasury that is changing the rules, pushing extra cuts on to policing. The same is true in respect of further education colleges and university pensions. There is a consistent pattern; it
is repeat offending by the Treasury in this regard. It is not just policing that we should be addressing this evening; it is all the other public services that are equally subject to these sorts of changes, which will entail cuts.

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. I could give chapter and verse on the impact of pension contribution changes across a range of public services.

Owen Smith: It is not just policing.

Wes Streeting: As my hon. Friend says, it is not just policing. Before I was elected to this place, I was deputy leader of the London Borough of Redbridge. I had the enormous privilege of representing my home community on Redbridge Borough Council for eight years, and what I consistently saw across local government services was exactly the same pattern of behaviour: decisions taken in the Treasury brutalised the budgets of Government Departments, and then the Government Departments devolved the cuts, and the responsibility for those cuts, to local authorities. That is absolutely outrageous.

When the austerity agenda first began, I think everyone would acknowledge that some cuts were made to services that, frankly, some people did not really notice. What has changed over the past eight years is that the Government started by clamping down on some of the inevitable inefficiencies and waste that exist in any organisation with big infrastructure, then they began to impact on services—particularly specialist services that do not necessarily benefit the largest number of people but that have a substantial impact on particular service users—and now we are in a position where these cuts and the austerity agenda are not just widely felt, but deeply felt. That is why the Government have felt compelled to change their narrative on austerity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman is doing very well, and I know he wants to keep it going, but he has to try to stick to the subject. By talking about austerity, he will widen the debate completely out of where we are meant to be. This is about police pension cuts. I do not mind a debate around policing, but we cannot go over everything. There are a lot of other speakers, so he does not need to filibuster.

Wes Streeting: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will take your advice.

In London we have already lost 3,000 police officers, which is having a serious impact on community policing. In fact, my constituents are now under no illusion. Community policing only really exists in speeches by Ministers at the Dispatch Box; it certainly does not exist in reality on the ground. The few stretched resources that we have left on the ground are really struggling.

The changes to police employer pension contributions are one of the most egregious changes that the Government have made to policing, and no doubt we will hear the same rhetoric as they try to make the contribution changes sound as technocratic and as irrelevant to people’s everyday experiences as possible. The reality is that people have really noticed the police cuts. This invidious language, saying, “Don’t worry, because we have cut out all the back office,” is not only disrespectful to public servants who did an excellent job, and who have now lost their job. I can tell the Minister that what police officers in my constituency tell me is that they are now spending more time processing criminals than catching them. That is not an acceptable state of play, and I fear that things will become far worse as a result of these changes to police employer pension contributions.

I give fair notice via the Treasury Bench that, when the Chancellor next comes before the Treasury Committee, he can be assured of a rough ride on the decisions he is taking and their impact on Home Office budgets, and therefore on police budgets. What he and his predecessor have done is absolutely outrageous, and I note the irony of editorials in the Evening Standard railing against police cuts and rising crime in London, and trying to pin responsibility on the Mayor of London. The editor of my local newspaper might like to look in the mirror before dishing out blame to others.

How the Government are proceeding is a terrible mistake, and we must not countenance it. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East for securing this Adjournment debate, and I am grateful to the Government, because their shambolic handling of the business of the House means that we now have so many hours to debate this subject before the House adjourns.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Only if you let somebody else get in.

Wes Streeting: We have so long, but I will draw my remarks to a conclusion. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] This is a novelty I am not used to. We know why we are here—obviously, we are trying to draw out the business—but this is a serious issue. We would not have stuck around for any old Adjournment debate on an obscure issue; this is so important to us in our constituencies. Whatever is going on in the wider world around Brexit, I cannot emphasise strongly enough that no issue is more important to my constituents than policing, police numbers, police budgets, crime and community safety, and therefore no issue is more important to me.

4.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) about the real issue of policing here in the capital, but I want to reflect on North Yorkshire. Everybody says what a wonderful city York is, and I agree with that, but it is really challenged, too. Crime is an issue that has been brought to my attention by so many of my constituents, and we have challenges and pressures on our police service.

I want to raise a number of points associated with that. Antisocial behaviour has provided our city with a poor label at night and we do not have the policing available to bring that under control. As is the case for other hon. Members, county lines has also had a real impact on our city. Individuals are preying on the most vulnerable people in our city. I spent an evening with the police recently, and I was devastated to hear how the county lines special operations unit was being cut. These are vital prevention services being cut, and it is because the money clearly is not in the budgets to be...
able to provide security and safety to the most vulnerable children in our communities and the most vulnerable people in our cities.

The police also pick up capacity where other services fail. We cannot dismiss the 50% cut in local authority funding and of course the cuts to safer neighbourhoods partnerships, which are formed with the police. The police are ever more having to subsidise for those serious cuts in our communities. I must also raise the issue of the serious impact on mental health and the fact that our police officers are often at the frontline of providing mental health services to some of the most vulnerable people we know in our communities. Of course, where there are pressures on the mental health service—despite the warm words from the Prime Minister—the money is not reaching the frontline. Services are seriously at risk and stretched, and this is putting people in my constituency at risk. If the cuts we are hearing about to our police service are added to that, it will put a real pressure on those services.

Again, I want to reflect on an evening I spent with the police. I was meant to be looking at some of the work they were doing to tackle county lines, but instead I was diverted to spend five hours with a woman with dementia, whose partner had tried to take his life. Fourteen professionals were involved in that case, which diverted resources. Five police officers were involved in trying to provide safety for that individual because of the failed mental health services. The police are having to pick up the price of other services which are not able to fill those spaces, an issue I am sure the Minister will wish to respond to because it has an overall impact on the budgets available to policing. That is what we are discussing tonight: the impact that this is having on our communities, and on their security and safety. Crime in York has now become an issue that is frequently not only in the headlines of our newspapers, but on the lips of my constituents, as I speak to them day by day. They are increasingly concerned about what is happening in our community. We have many pressures in our city, but crime has shot up the agenda—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Sorry, but this debate is about contributions to pensions. We have to very careful here, because otherwise we could open up all areas. As much as I love York and know how important it is, and as much as you may be right and I understand all the aspects you have raised, I must ask you to include pension contributions as well, in order to help me.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was about to turn to the pension changes. Police and crime commissioner Julia Mulligan wrote to me just yesterday about the pressures. This issue applies not only to North Yorkshire police; as the Minister will know, as of tomorrow it will affect the North Yorkshire fire and rescue service because the services are to be amalgamated. We are therefore not only putting community safety at risk but risking safety with regard to the fire service—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Sorry, but as much as the hon. Lady wants to spread the debate, it is not a debate about the fire service and it is not about dementia. It is about police pension contributions. I am trying to be as helpful as I can be; if Members can ensure that the debate is about pension contributions, the lack of police numbers and the fact that they may have to be cut, that will help me a lot. Bringing in the fire authority does not help me in the slightest.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The motion refers to changes to police employer pension contributions. As I was just explaining to the House, in North Yorkshire, as of tomorrow, the fire and rescue authority and the police will be amalgamated, so the fire and rescue service is absolutely pertinent to the debate. I shall therefore continue as I was, Mr Deputy Speaker.

As I have already highlighted, the cost to North Yorkshire police will be £1.6 million in 2019-20 and £4 million in 2020-21. That is on top of the £10 million that is already having to be saved. The police authority was seeking to recruit another 70 police officers but is now having to put that opportunity on hold.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is advancing an important argument, which is that every penny that the police now have to put into increased employer contributions is one penny less that they have to spend on the mental health services and employer support that they have to provide, and on vital community services. Does she agree with my local chief constable in Staffordshire, who has said that cuts like this will not only impact on police numbers, but mean that in some parts of the county the services that he provides in addition to traditional policing will just have to stop?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Policing is not just about the police service; it is about the wider partnerships that are formed.

Let me return to the point I was making—

Gareth Thomas: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I will just make a little progress, then I will be happy to give way.

The problem raised by the police and crime commissioner is that there is no certainty in the future, beyond 2019-20, about the impact of the cuts to pension contributions, so it is really important that we have clarity from the Minister about the future of the police force, not only in the short term but in the long term.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is making a good speech about her area. Does she agree that the Minister and his Home Office colleagues will have an early opportunity to put right the debate that has motivated my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) to secure this debate? The report on the police grant has to come before the House soon; perhaps my hon. Friend might like to encourage the Minister to intervene on her, perhaps at 5 o’clock, to set out a specific guarantee that the Government are going to fill the gap identified by my right hon. Friend?

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Minister has a real opportunity to alleviate the fears of police and crime commissioners and those with responsibility for policing up and down the country, and to address the real shortfall they are facing.
in their budgets. I would of course welcome any intervention from the Minister in which he did that, because there is clearly a lot of concern throughout the country, not only for our constituents’ security but for the services themselves.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the absence of an intervention from the Minister, perhaps I can echo what my hon. Friend is saying. Northumbria police and crime commissioner Vera Baird has written to me to say that the “pension changes demanded by the government could cost Northumbria £11 million per year...equivalent to a loss of 220 Police Officers.”

That follows a cut of a third in funding since 2010, which has already led to the loss of 1,000 police officers.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you. Friend for her intervention. We all know that Vera Baird, a police and crime commissioner, commands so much respect across the whole community of police and crime commissioners. She does not mince her words in highlighting the real pressures that are now bearing down on her budgets in Northumbria. It is clear that, across the country, police and crime commissioners are being put under undue stress in trying to balance sheets that cannot be balanced.

Let me return, if I may, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the situation in North Yorkshire. I am not sure whether you heard my response to the point that you made to me about the fire and rescue service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Just to help: I recognise that you are bringing the subjects together. It is about trying to save money and being forced to do so, but what I want you to do is to link that up to pensions. As long as you link the subject to pensions, I am comfortable, I can assure you.

Rachael Maskell: I am really grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for providing that clarity. This absolutely does link into the pensions, as the police and crime commissioner has set out for me. There is a perception that there is a large financial reserve within the budgets to absorb costs such as pensions but, clearly, that is not the case, and it is certainly not the case in North Yorkshire. Home Office figures of 6 November 2018 showed that the financial reserves of the North Yorkshire fire and rescue service, as a share of core spending power, were the third lowest in the country, at just over 20%, which equates to £6.6 million. The amalgamation of the fire service and the police will, therefore, bear down on the police pension. The same is happening in the areas represented by my colleagues. In fact, it is estimated that the fire and rescue service will have to lose 37 firefighters, which is 12% of the overall total number of firefighters in my constituency. Again, that will have a real negative impact on safety. That is a direct result of the cuts that we are debating this evening.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must say to the hon. Lady that we are not debating cuts; we are debating the pension contributions to the police. I am trying really hard to allow you to raise cuts in other areas, but I would be much happier if you could please keep pension contributions in part of your speech.

Rachael Maskell: Let me clarify my point, Mr Deputy Speaker. Cuts are coming because, obviously, the police and crime commissioner is having to divert the budget into pensions. As a result, services are being cut. Therefore, that has a negative impact on the services that are being provided. So this is directly about cuts as a result of having to divert budgets. I hope that that clarifies that point. That is what police and crime commissioners are having to manage.

Mike Amesbury: Just to clarify, is the police and crime commissioner for North Yorkshire a Conservative?

Rachael Maskell indicated assent.

Mike Amesbury: I have just received a tweet from a Tory councillor in Cheshire who claims that we are posturing in this debate. What does my hon. Friend say to that?

Rachael Maskell: Julia Mulligan wrote to me yesterday, before this debate, to urge me—[Interruption.] Yes, a Conservative police and crime commissioner. She wrote to me to urge me to make the case to the Minister about the impact that these pension contribution changes will have. Clearly, that has a direct effect on the services that can be run, so it is not posturing. We are deeply, deeply concerned about the safety of our communities as a result of the redirection of resources.

Chi Onwurah: Let me emphasise and underline my hon. Friend’s point about the connection between the changes to pension contributions and future cuts. The police and crime commissioner for Northumbria has said that, should these changes to pension contributions go ahead, she will need to make savings of £4.3 million in 2019-20 and a further £6.7 million in 2020-21.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you. Friend for providing that clarity. Yet again, we are talking about services that are having to be reduced as a result of resources being diverted into pension pots. These services have clearly not been receiving the revenue to properly substantiate their current pensions. For our police and crime commissioners, this means that £1.5 million will have to be diverted just to address the fire service alone. I have mentioned the loss of firefighters as a result, but there is also a lack of resource to deliver the replacement of five fire engines because of the budget being diverted. When it comes to crewing, over a third of the day’s shifts at fire stations are affected as the budget is diverted into the pension contributions that will have to be made. This is happening as a result of the new pressures and demands on the service. The police and crime commissioner also highlights the cost of crewing three quarters of the 24 retained fire stations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I really am sorry; I am trying very hard to be helpful. It is no use the hon. Lady shaking her head at me. I did not pick the title of the debate. The title is very clear: police pension contributions. As much as fire crew numbers, fire stations and fire engines are important—and I am 100% in agreement on those points—unfortunately the debate is not about the fire service.

Rachael Maskell: Yes, it is.
Mr Deputy Speaker: No, it is not. I am sorry, but the title is on the annunciator: police. It does not mention fire services. I am going to have to give a ruling, which I did not want to do. The debate is about the police, not fire services. I understand that there is a consequence, but let us stick to the effect of police pension contributions.

Rachael Maskell: With respect, Mr Deputy Speaker, I can see that the title on the annunciator is actually different from that on the Order Paper. I am speaking to the title on the Order Paper, which is “Changes to police employer pension contributions.” North Yorkshire police will tomorrow incorporate the North Yorkshire fire and rescue service, so these points are directly related to the title on the Order Paper, as opposed to the title on the annunciator.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Unfortunately, I think you have answered your own question—tomorrow, not today. Let me help the House. There are other Members who wish to speak. The 5 o’clock deadline has passed, so there is going to be no statement from the Government tonight. By all means, let us hear speeches, but if this is about keeping the House going, there is no purpose at this stage.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, we are talking about future contributions to the pensions scheme across the board. Therefore, whether the changes to the police are happening tomorrow or into the future beyond that, clearly there will be a devastating impact across North Yorkshire, as I have highlighted in my contribution. I will leave it there because I know that other hon. Members wish to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: What a great choice.

Jack Dromey rose—

Gareth Thomas rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: We started off with the Midlands; let’s go with the Midlands again and then we will come back to London. I call Jack Dromey.

5.7 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I would like to talk about why the police matter; the impact thus far of cuts to the police service; and just how serious the impact will be if this situation continues, particularly when it comes to pension costs.

The first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens. That is a duty that Labour took very seriously while in government. We invested in the police service, with 17,000 extra police officers, 16,000 police community support officers, and the establishment of neighbourhood policing, celebrated worldwide for its effectiveness and much loved by the public, bringing crime down by 43%. We have now seen the dramatic turning of the tide. Under this Government, 21,000 police officers have gone, with crime rapidly rising as a consequence. In the West Midlands, 2,100 police officers have gone, and the impact on the public and the police has been catastrophic.

In the Perry Common area of my constituency, fear stalks a certain street. One woman said to me, “I have lived here for 44 years, Jack, but I now cannot go out at night because I fear the consequences.” There has been an outbreak of knife crime and gun crime. In another part of my constituency, Frances Road, there has been a rapid growth of houses in multiple occupation, with the associated crime and antisocial behaviour, transforming a settled community into a place where a mother told me, “Every time my daughter wants to get the bus on Slade Road, I have to take her down there because she fears going out by herself.” There is the impact on a settled, strong community such as Castle Vale, with the outbreak of crime and antisocial behaviour. As ever fewer police officers have been on the beat, the problems have got ever worse. There is also the impact on the Fort shopping area, with a rapid growth in crime and antisocial behaviour.

We will see whether the statement made by the Home Secretary is translated into practical action at the next stages. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said in his brilliant speech, if the Government are saying that they get it, they now need to act on it. That is what is so extraordinary is that, up until now, the Government have been in complete denial. The current Prime Minister, previously the Home Secretary for the best part of seven years, would say, “We cut police, yes, but we cut crime.” Nothing could be further from the truth.

The explosion in crime all over Britain is deeply worrying, as is the progressive hollowing-out of neighbourhood policing. At the heart of this debate are the concerns being expressed by the West Midlands police service as to what will happen to neighbourhood policing. Neighbourhood policing is not just crucial in terms of safety and security—actually, neighbourhood policing is the bedrock of counter-terrorism. It is about the systematic cultivation of relationships with the community, the acquiring of intelligence and the identifying of wrongdoing that is absolutely essential. The West Midlands police have said that, if they have to pay these pension costs, 450 more police officers will go as a consequence. That will stretch the thin blue line ever thinner, with ever more serious consequences.

Gareth Snell: I think we all know in this House the dedication that my hon. Friend has to the police services not just in the West Midlands but across the country. He speaks very much to the situation we have in Staffordshire, where neighbourhood teams are now being asked to look after increasingly large areas, meaning that they lose the connections with local communities whereby they gather intelligence and prevent much more serious crime from happening. Does he share my concern that there is only so far that we can stretch neighbourhood policing before it becomes meaningless and before what we actually have is policing that is no more than numbers of officers sitting at a desk because they simply cannot patrol the patch they have been sent to?

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is the hollowing-out of neighbourhood policing, with the immense dangers that I have described in relation to, for example, counter-terrorism, as well as the role that neighbourhood policing plays in engaging people, diverting them from crime, and preventing crime in the first place. All of that goes. Across the West Midlands—and, indeed, across the country, every effort is being made by our chief constable and our police and crime commissioner to preserve neighbourhood policing.
but increasingly it is neighbourhood policing in name only because police officers are getting pulled off neighbourhood policing and put on to response. That absolutely cannot be right.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent speech he is making. Over the summer, I spent a day with my Northumbria police force, where what he is speaking about was so evident. Police officers and neighbourhood police are already working through their own breaks—in effect, working unpaid overtime—in order to try to deliver the service that they could deliver before, and in the knowledge that future cuts would make this absolutely untenable. As a consequence of that, I am, for the first time, having to hold a surgery in Newcastle dedicated entirely to crime because of the concerns in our neighbourhoods.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the debate on the impact of increased pension costs, the point has been made to me that this is about the impact not just on the public but on the police themselves. We are seeing real and growing problems of sickness, ill-health and sometimes mental stress as a consequence of the thin blue line being stretched ever thinner.

These are dedicated men and women. I pay tribute to our police service. The job that they do, often in the most difficult of circumstances, is truly outstanding, and to see the way that they have been treated and disparaged is fundamentally wrong. I remember when regulation A19 was used in the early stages of police cuts, and some of the most outstanding police officers in the west midlands were forced out of the service—people such as Detective Constable Tim Kennedy, who was one of the best in Britain, and Inspector Mark Stokes, whose leadership was outstanding. Those were excellent men and women who had served in the police for 30 years and were forced out at the age of 51, 52 and 53, all as a consequence of the Government’s determination to reduce the police service, betraying the first duty of any Government.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a truly excellent contribution. Does he accept that one problem—we see this in Gloucestershire—is that an increasing number of police officers do not see through their course of duty? They are retiring early, which has a huge impact on the pension fund because they are not contributing for their whole 30-year service, as they used to, and that is having a deleterious effect.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

In the context of this discussion on the impact of yet further cuts to the police service, I want to mention a police officer in my constituency—it would not be right to name him—who was in tears because he could not believe what was happening. He was under real and growing pressure. He was absolutely dedicated to the service that he had given his life to, and he wanted to remain in the service. The fact that really good men and women are contemplating leaving the service they love as a consequence of the growing impact of cuts is fundamentally wrong.

The Government can no longer be in denial. It is simply not true that they cut police and they cut crime. Crime is soaring, including new forms of crime. The police statistics now take account of cyber-crime, of which there are 5 million incidents a year and more. We are at a defining moment in the history of the police service in our country. At the sharp end, our police and crime commissioner David Jamieson and Chief Constable Dave Thompson, who give outstanding leadership, are doing everything they can. They are modelling what happens if they have to find the money necessary to avoid 450 more police officers going as a result of police cuts.

The voice of the police service is clear: enough is enough. The Government cannot ask the overstretched and underfunded police service to pay the costs of much-deserved increases to pension entitlements. Neither should they ask the public to pay. The Government are saying to local authorities, “Oh yes, by all means fund the increase—use the precept,” which devolves responsibility and blame, and absolves the Government of their responsibility through the Treasury to give priority to investment in our police service.

Gareth Snell: I thank my hon. Friend for giving away a second time. Does he share my concern regarding the precept that the indiscriminate way in which council tax varies so greatly across the country means that there is a 2% increase in Staffordshire, but it is considerably less than 2% in some London boroughs and possibly 2% more in other places? We are therefore building inequality into police funding, rather than the equality we need.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have a bizarre situation under the current formula in which high-need, high-crime west midlands suffers disproportionately much more than low-need, relatively low-crime Surrey. That cannot be right.

In conclusion, this is a defining moment for the police service. Labour, led by our excellent shadow Policing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), is time and again making the argument as to why policing matters. If the Policing Minister came to the streets and estates of Erdington, he would see increasing fear and hear people saying, “The police are great, Jack, but we never see them any longer. We’re losing contact. We rang up, but they couldn’t come out; they said they were overstretched.” That cannot be right. That is why it is crucial that the Government commit to funding these much-deserved pension increases, reversing the tide of the last eight years and investing in their first duty, which is the safety and security of the British public.

5.19 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to participate in this debate on the increase in employers’ pension contributions that is expected of the police. I want to reference in particular the situation in London. If the House will forgive me, I will be largely parochial in my comments.

The context for my comments is the potential demand facing London for £130 million to meet the gap resulting from how the Government have decided employer pension contributions should be calculated. As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, has identified that the change will potentially cost the
Met police £130 million, which is equivalent to some 2,000 police officer positions. As my hon. Friend rightly set out, that comes in the context of some 3,000 police officers having already been lost from London since 2010.

In my London Borough of Harrow, we have seen just shy of 200 police officer positions lost since 2010. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) effectively challenged the Minister for Policing to go to the estates in his community and hear the concerns about rising crime. The Minister has already been to many of the estates and roads in my constituency and already heard many of the concerns, because every general election he is to be found knocking on doors in Harrow West. He is ostensively campaigning for the Conservative opponent to the sitting Labour and Co-operative Member for Harrow West, but perhaps he is quietly canvassing for me—I do not know. He is assiduous in ostensively trying to help every Conservative candidate, and as a result will have consistently heard the concerns about policing in Harrow.

The Minister will know, for example, of the rise in violent crime. That is noticeable in particular over the past 12 months in Rayners Lane and the Grange Farm estate, where we have seen guns used in incidents of violent crime. That is an unprecedented situation in my estate, where we have seen guns used in incidents of violent crime. That is noticeable in particular over the past 12 months in Rayners Lane and the Grange Farm estate. They are concerned about incidents of antisocial behaviour, particularly aggressive drinking, in Wealdstone and South Harrow. They ask where the police are in dealing with that.

What has happened in recent years has been the slow reduction in police numbers. If the Minister for Policing and his boss the Home Secretary again fail to persuade the Chancellor of the Exchequer in advance of the police grant report to make good the £400 million-odd that is required nationally to stop further cuts to policing due to the increase in police employer contributions, the concern is that there will be further cuts to policing in Harrow, and that is profoundly worrying. As a result of the merger of police borough command units that Sadiq Khan has had to make happen, Harrow—a comparatively low-crime borough in comparison to its neighbours—Barnet and Brent have been merged. We face the very real prospect of the police officers assigned to the three boroughs increasingly being used to fight crime in Barnet and Brent and more police being diverted out of Harrow for that purpose.

The concerns of my constituents have been exacerbated by the fact that the response teams for the new borough command unit will be based not at Harrow police station, but in the police stations in Colindale and Wembley. That will, inevitably, increase the response time for violent incidents in Harrow. Let us bear in mind the fact that the custody suite at Harrow police station has been earmarked for closure for some time, so those who are arrested in Harrow will be taken primarily to Colindale, but potentially also to Wembley. That will increase the amount of time for which police officers are outside our borough and unavailable to respond to crime.

The visibility of PCSOs and police officers substantially increased in my constituency and across London. It is profoundly concerning that the Government have not grasped the scale of the fear of crime in inner and outer London. It is profoundly concerning that the Government have not grasped the scale of the fear of crime in inner and outer London. When I was first elected as a Member of Parliament, gang tensions—to the extent that they existed—were a feature of inner London, but they have now become a feature of outer London. There have been many good initiatives, and I take the opportunity to praise in passing the Ignite Trust, a superb charity that operates in my constituency, for its efforts to resolve some of the tensions between a gang based in my constituency and another based in the neighbouring borough of Ealing. Despite such work, without the support of a more visible police presence, I suspect that we will continue to face difficulties with rising gang crime.

Other hon. Members have raised the significant impact on neighbourhood policing of the loss of police numbers. I remember when the last Labour Government introduced neighbourhood policing, and what a difference it made in the south Harrow part of my constituency. At one high school, unsavoury characters used to collect outside the school gates. When police from the ward-based neighbourhood policing team were deployed outside the school gates for half an hour, those unsavoury characters instantly disappeared, and any who did show their face could be pursued. The neighbourhood police were able to provide an immediate and effective response. The visibility of PCSOs and police officers substantially reduced the fear of crime in my constituency and across London. It is profoundly concerning that the Government have not grasped the scale of the fear of crime in inner and outer London.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the effectiveness of neighbourhood policing and PCSOs. Does he agree that they are the eyes and ears of the police? The reason for the rising crime rate under this Tory Government is the removal of neighbourhood policing, which gathers intelligence for the whole police service.

Gareth Thomas: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Whether in the north of England or in our great capital city, it has been a false choice to allow the funding cuts to the police that have led to the reduction in neighbourhood policing. Unsurprisingly, there has been a reduction in the number of people convicted for committing crime as a result. There are not the police officers to access the necessary intelligence to find those who are guilty of offences or to process them through the courts. I hope it will not be long before the Minister comes to Harrow West again. I am willing to take him on a tour of the hotspots of crime in Harrow to help him better understand his responsibilities, not just to my constituents and the
constituents of London, but to all the people of this great country who deserve far better than they are getting from this Government in terms of funding to fight crime.

I end by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for securing this debate. I hope that at the conclusion of this debate, and if not today then perhaps at the police grant report or at Prime Minister’s questions next week, we hear an announcement that there will not be a requirement on police forces to find an extra contribution to pension funds and that we will not see the substantial reduction in police numbers many of us fear will happen if the Government go ahead with this measure.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am going to bring in the police Minister. Maybe he could give me a little update, if there is any news, to help the House at this stage.

5.31 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I am delighted to provide an update and to say how much I have enjoyed this important debate, although it is slightly longer than I anticipated when I woke up this morning.

I am authorised to give an update to the House in response to the many points of order raised by Members on the clear sensitivity around due process in relation to the hugely important issue of any Brexit deal. I am authorised to inform the House that there will be no press statement this evening. There was considerable concern in the House about that happening before the Prime Minister came to Parliament. I can also confirm to the House that the Cabinet meeting is still ongoing. I am sure the House will therefore appreciate that the Prime Minister is not in a position to come forward. There are issues around trust and confidence. That requires a robust police system to be shown to Parliament.

I will now respond to the substantive issue raised in the debate. I thank the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for securing this long debate, which has had many contributions. In doing so, he has done me a favour by sending another signal to the Treasury about the importance of resolving this issue. I do not want to sound facetious, because we are talking about an extremely important issue that affects one of the most important public services in the country and a service, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) rightly said, that is the envy of most countries around the world. Let me be clear, not least to my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), that I am extremely aware, not least as a constituency MP, of the public’s rising anxiety about crime and the police. The Government absolutely understand that this is a system under pressure. I will come on to say more about that, but let me try to address the issues raised by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East and, with his permission, some of the issues raised by other Members who contributed to the debate.

It may surprise the right hon. Gentleman to hear that he and I are in agreement. Neither he, nor I, nor the Home Secretary wants to see any further reduction in police numbers. The right hon. Gentleman will know, because I am sure that he will have done his research, that police officer numbers have been stable over the past year. However, let me make it clear that the Home Secretary and me is to increase the capacity of the police, because we have to increase their capacity to help them to respond to demand, which has risen and become increasingly complex. Therefore, without getting too technocratic, resource-weighted demand is the concern. They are getting drawn into more complex activity, which requires more time, more resource and longer, more complex investigations.

Underlying this—we have seen this shift since around 2014-15—are three elements. One is definitely the very unwelcome increase in certain categories of crime, and of course, the most alarming and most unacceptable is the violent crime—the knife crime—that the right hon. Gentleman rightly emphasised. Whatever the politics, I sense that there is absolutely cross-party support in the House to bear down on this, which is arguably one of the biggest challenges that we face as a society, given the complexity of the issues. We are definitely seeing some increase in crime—that is genuine and very unwelcome.

We are also seeing—I hope that the House sees this as something we can welcome—an increasing demand as a result of the police becoming much better at recording crime. We have to remember that it is not that long ago—2014—that the independent Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary was telling us that in its estimation the police were failing to record one in five crimes registered with them. That is absolutely unacceptable, and to the great credit of the police, they have responded to that criticism, but that generates additional demand.

I hope that the House would also welcome the third dimension of this increased demand, as made clear by the Office for National Statistics, which is an increased willingness of victims of so-called hidden crime to come forward to the police. I think that this represents very welcome, significant progress in society. If the victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and modern slavery feel increasingly confident about coming forward to the police, that is a sign of progress in the messages we send about the seriousness that we attach to investigating those crimes. I am prepared, as I hope that others are—whatever our politics—to show some respect to the current Prime Minister and previous Home Secretary for her leadership on this issue, including not least on modern slavery. This combination of factors has undeniably increased demand on the police, and the complexity of that demand makes their task even more difficult.

Gareth Thomas: Does the Minister accept, though, that those who see gang-related violence will not be encouraged to come forward and report what they have seen if they do not see the police securing convictions? I am worried that that is beginning to happen in my constituency.

Mr Hurd: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern because I recognise the underlying concern, which has been expressed by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick and the Mayor, about encouraging people to come forward. There are issues around trust and confidence. That requires a robust police system to be
there for people. We are increasingly seeing that in London, but we are also all aware of some of the underlying challenges with regard to trust in the police in certain communities, on which, to their great credit, the Metropolitan police have done a lot of work over many years to try to improve. This is not straightforward, but it is a real issue.

When I said that our priority is to increase the capacity of the police, that was not just rhetoric. Last year, as part of the police funding settlement, I stood at this Dispatch Box and took the first step on that journey—a step welcomed by David Thompson in the west midlands. It was not enough in his opinion, but he saw it for what it was: a first step in the right direction towards increasing the capacity of our police system with a police and funding settlement that has resulted in an additional £460 million of public money in our police system.

I also signalled last year our intention to do something similar for 2019-20, subject to the police meeting certain conditions on efficiency and productivity, again sending a signal of our intention to support investment in, not cuts to, policing. As a result, almost every police force in the country is recruiting additional officers. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) talked about the Met. As a fellow London MP, I share his concern, but I am sure he will also welcome the steps taken to recruit extra officers to the Met. I believe that 700 have been recruited through a combination of what was enabled under the funding settlement and the actions of the Mayor himself. As London MPs, we should recognise that the Met is recruiting additional officers at scale.

Alongside the funding settlement and the support for local forces is the additional investment that continues to be made from the centre, through the police transformation fund, in working with police to build their national capabilities. We know the importance of building those capabilities in a fragmented system. More money has gone in to uplift armed officer capability, to support the increasing number of detectives and to support important new facets of policing, such as the first national wellbeing programme for frontline officers, which I hope the Labour party will support, and the investment in helping the police to build something that is critical for their future: their digital capability. There is, then, additional investment in policing.

There are challenges though. I find myself in full agreement again with Labour MPs over the importance of neighbourhood policing, which has come under considerable pressure in recent years, as the independent inspectorate made clear. There has been an inconsistent picture in neighbourhood policing across the country. I hope the Labour party will support what the Met is doing now to agree new guidelines on what represents best practice in neighbourhood policing. The majority of forces are now adopting that best practice, meaning we will be developing a much more consistent model of neighbourhood policing.

With that comes a growing emphasis on crime prevention. I agree absolutely with the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East. We cannot afford a police force that is reactive, but the police are increasingly concerned about becoming reactive. We all surely understand the importance of crime prevention. It is always smarter to invest in the fence at the top of the cliff than in the ambulance at the bottom. With that additional capacity and rebuilding of the neighbourhood policing model, I hope and expect to see a reassertion of traditional police strengths in problem solving.

I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman said about knife crime. Of course, there is a need for a robust policing pillar for that. It needs to be a combination of robust policing and preventing work to tackle the root causes. He understands, as does everyone, all the lessons from places that have beaten down on this problem in the past. It is that combination that is important and which I see being put in place through the serious violence strategy. I thank him also for recognising the importance of the additional funding for counter-terrorism policing in the Budget. We all understand the importance of that, and I am delighted to hear that the Labour party supports it.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is no longer in her place—[Interruption.] I am so sorry. She has moved, which is really unhelpful for Ministers at the Dispatch Box—[Laughter.]—but I am delighted she is still here. She rightly raised the very important issue of mental health. All MPs engaged closely with their forces will know the growing frustration and unease among our police offices at how long they spend supporting people with mental health issues in their communities, so I hope the Labour party will welcome the additional investment in mental health locally. I am clear in my mind that one of the dividends from that additional investment must be a reduction in demand on the police, and I have made that point directly to the Secretary of State for Health.

The point I am labouring is that, although there is a lot of talk about cuts, in fact the Government have recognised that the demands on policing have changed, and, bearing in mind the limited resources and our concern for how much tax our constituents are able and prepared to pay, we have taken steps to increase investment in policing. With the £460 million, we are investing £1 billion more in our police system than we were three years ago.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Minister says that he has thought again about cuts. Does he not accept that the Government’s cutting more than 20,000 police officers led to the destruction of neighbourhood policing in the first place?

Mr Hurd: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady for taking me on to my next point, which is a very uncharacteristically tribal one. I say with great respect to Labour Members who have stood up and talked with great pride about the amount that the last Labour Government invested in public services and policing that the honest, hard truth is that, as ever, they ran out of money. The Labour party likes to talk about cuts having consequences, but the frank truth is that cuts are themselves the consequences of the legacy of a Government in which, I may say, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East served with great distinction as a Minister. The biggest legacy of that Government was the biggest peacetime budget deficit in the history of this country. Yet again, my party had to intervene to sort out a mess, which required radical action and tough decisions.

Let me make another point to the hon. Lady. There are two reasons—about which, again, we need to be frank—for the fact that, back in 2010, it was possible to reduce police budgets. First, demand on the police was
stable at that time, and secondly, there was cross-party consensus in the House that the police system was inefficient. Even Andy Burnham, sitting opposite where I stand now, was quite prepared to admit that there was inefficiency in the police system that needed to be addressed, and it has been addressed.

**Wes Streeting rose—**

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

**Mr Hurd:** I should be delighted to give way.

**Mike Gapes:** The hon. Member—

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. Mr Gapes has only just come into the Chamber. He wants to hear a bit more of the debate before he intervenes so quickly. Come on! He should know better.

**Mr Hurd:** Thank you for correcting me, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** This man has been here throughout the debate!

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way so that the voice of Ilford can be heard.

**Mike Gapes:** I agree with every word.

**Wes Streeting:** I am almost certain that this is what my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) would have said, given the opportunity. Let us not lose sight of the fact that the challenge facing the Government after 2008 was the result of a global banking crisis. If it is true, as the Minister is suggesting, that the last Labour Government were profligate, perhaps he would like to explain why the shadow Chancellor and the Leader of the Opposition at the time, up to the crash, were backing Labour spending pound for pound.

**Mr Hurd:** The voice of Ilford should never be silenced, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is entitled to his own version of events, but the fundamental fact is that the coalition Government inherited the biggest peacetime budget deficit in the history of this country, and had to take some radical action.

I want to deal with the pension issue, which is the substance of the debate, but before I do so, let me make the point that when the situation has changed—and the situation in 2018 is different from that in 2010, because the picture of demand on the police has changed and the financial efficiency of the police has changed—so have the Government. We are not talking about cuts. We are talking about additional public investment in our police system: over £1 billion more this year than three years ago.

Let me now address the pension issue. There is a problem, and I want to be frank about it. As I stand here at the Dispatch Box, it remains unresolved, but, as I have said at the Dispatch Box during an urgent question and subsequently, our intention is to resolve it in the police funding settlement scheduled for early December.

**Mr McFadden:** I will resist the temptation to go back over the crisis with the Minister. I thought he was doing all right until then. Instead, may I ask him to clarify a point? I read out statements made by the Chancellor to the Treasury Committee and a written answer from the Chief Secretary. I genuinely want us to leave the Chamber with the same understanding, so will the Minister confirm that no money has been set aside from the Government reserve for Departments and so on? This is an issue in which a cost has been identified, but, as yet, the question of how to pay for it remains unresolved. Will that be a correct understanding as we leave?

**Mr Hurd:** As I said during the urgent question, our intention is to resolve the issue at the time of the police funding settlement. It is my responsibility to bring that to Parliament and it is currently scheduled for early December. That is when we will announce our police funding proposal for next year, and I hope to resolve the pension issue.

The Government have made it clear that the costs for beyond 2019-20 will be resolved in the comprehensive spending review. So there is an issue for 2019-20, which I hope to resolve at the 2019-20 funding settlement in early December, and we have made it clear that the costs beyond 2020 will be resolved in the CSR process. I want to give a little more detail and context to that.

**Andrew Percy:** Does that mean that I can go back to the chief constable of Humberside—he is a first-class police officer, and, as I have said, we have managed to secure increased police numbers in recent years in our area—and say that the Government will absolutely ensure that Humberside Police does not have to cut a single police officer or all of its police community support officers, which is the potential effect of these changes in Humberside?

**Mr Hurd:** What I can say to my hon. Friend is that I have absolutely no intention of coming to this House to propose a funding settlement that will result in fewer police officers. [Interruption.] No, last year I submitted a police funding settlement that resulted in—

**Gareth Thomas:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I would not normally intervene on a speech by a Minister replying to a debate, but I am seeing on social media that, despite the Minister saying there will be no statement about the Cabinet’s discussions on Brexit, there is now due to be a statement by the Prime Minister to the press afterwards. I wonder if there is any way in which we can clarify the situation.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** That is not a matter for me, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. I am sure if somebody wishes to come forward, they can do so, but the Minister did give a very honest, open statement. I have no more to add other than what has been said. I suggest that the Minister continues with the debate unless he has an answer to the question.

**David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP):** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Let the Minister at least answer the point of order first.

**Mr Hurd:** I am grateful to Mr Deputy Speaker. What I said at the Dispatch Box is what I was authorised to say. I have no further updates.
David Linden: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister is of course correct that there will be no press conference, but there is still a microphone outside No. 10 Downing Street and it is being briefed that the Prime Minister will come to that microphone and give a statement. Why is she not coming to the microphone at the Dispatch Box?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for me, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, but at least, if nothing else, Members have put a lot on the record tonight.

Mr Hurd: To continue with the Adjournment debate, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East understands the context of the pensions issue. There was a Treasury decision, on independent advice, to revalue the public pension. I say to the hon. Member for Ilford North that this is not a technocratic issue. Only the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) referred to this issue in human terms; it is about safeguarding the affordability, sustainability and value of the pensions of the public sector workers in our constituencies. So it is an important issue, and there is no other motivation behind it. In the 2016 Budget the Treasury indicated its intention to change the discount rate that applies from 3% to 2.8%. In the 2018 Budget, again on independent advice, it indicated that it intends to make a further change to 2.4% and, as a result of that, increased contributions are required from public sector employers.

The net impact on the police in 2019-20 would be an additional cost of £417 million. The Treasury clearly indicated very early that it would meet most of that, but its position has been to ask the police to find £165 million, which is broadly equivalent to what it felt it had indicated at the 2016 Budget. However, as hon. Members know, police and crime commissioners did not budget for it and they are therefore quite understandably concerned about the impact of this. The Government recognise their concern and, as the Chancellor said in his Budget statement, he recognises the pressure on the police and it is his intention to work with Home Office Ministers and the Home Secretary to find a resolution to this in the 2019-20 funding settlement. That is exactly what we intend to do.

I repeat my message of what I hope is reassurance to my hon. Friend for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) about our intention to build on the work that I did last year and to take the steps that are required to increase the capacity of the police, to help them to meet the demand on them, because public security is the No. 1 priority of this Government. We are determined to do what we can within the resources we have to ensure that the police have the resources they need.

Question put and agreed to.

5.55 pm

House adjourned.
 Deferred Division

Electricity

That the draft Electricity and Gas (Powers to Make Subordinate Legislation) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 5 September, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 285, Noes 223.

Division No. 257]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bin
Ainsley, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
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
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Doherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
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
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hemton, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, rh Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Jones, Margaret
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Mr Caroline
Johnson, rh Michelle
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kacwczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Madlean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Merriman, Huw
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, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Phillip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rosalyn
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streater, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Symes, rh Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Toffol, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Deferred Division

14 NOVEMBER 2018

Deferred Division

Trevlyn, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles

Whately, Helen
Wheelier, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Debbonaire, Thangam
De Piero, Gloria
De Cordova, Marsha
Day, Martyn
David, Wayne
Daby, Janet
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim

Question accordingly agreed to.

Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz

Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sheriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snel, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Export Strategy

1. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What recent progress the Government have made on their export strategy.

10. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent progress the Government have made on their export strategy.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): This is the first time that I have spoken in the House since the death of Sir Jeremy Heywood. He was a dedicated public servant to whom I, among many, owe a great debt. I am very fortunate to have been able to call him a friend as well as a colleague. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House would join in a tribute to Sir Jeremy.

The export strategy launched in the summer consists of the four ways in which Governments can make a difference: encourage, inform, connect and finance. It is only by making it easier for businesses that we will increase our exporting performance. Governments do not create wealth, businesses do.

James Morris: Last week, I visited Crosby Premier Stampings in Cradley Heath. The company has been forging for nearly 100 years in the Black country, and currently uses traditional and high-tech methods. It is increasing its global sales, including to China. Will the Secretary of State explain how the export strategy will help other such small and medium-sized enterprises to develop their export business worldwide?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend is a great champion of business in the Black country, but all businesses are different, and we want to help both new and seasoned exporters of all sizes with the sort of support that is appropriate to the barriers and opportunities that they will face. SMEs in particular will benefit from increased peer-to-peer learning, improved access to specialist advice, and the thousands of export opportunities on the great.gov.uk website.

Sir Edward Leigh: When I was a Minister at the Department of Trade and Industry, the Trade Minister had no control over trade policy—they just went on jollies around the world promoting trade. As we will now be stuck in the EU customs union for years to come, with no ability to make our own trade deals, will the Secretary of State change the name of his Department to the “Department for International Trade Promotion and Engagement with the Customs Union”?

Dr Fox: The Government’s intention is that we will leave the European Union in March, we will exit the implementation period in December 2020, and we will have a fully independent trade policy. We have already begun—and finished—the first four consultations on independent trade agreements with other countries.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): It is welcome that, under the draft EU withdrawal agreement, businesses that export to the EU can continue to discount tariffs, volumes, customs, fees and so on, but the documentation—this relates directly to future export strategy—says: “the development of the United Kingdom’s independent trade policy will be the subject of the future relationship negotiations.”

Given what we have seen so far, that effectively means that the UK will not be able to strike differentiated deals with third countries with which the EU currently has a deal. Given that that contradicts precisely everything that the Secretary of State has been saying, why has he not resigned?

Dr Fox: We have made it very clear that, in the areas where the EU already has an agreement, businesses that export to the EU can continue to discount tariffs, volumes, customs, fees and so on, but the documentation—this relates directly to future export strategy—says: “the development of the United Kingdom’s independent trade policy will be the subject of the future relationship negotiations.”

Given what we have seen so far, that effectively means that the UK will not be able to strike differentiated deals with third countries with which the EU currently has a deal. Given that that contradicts precisely everything that the Secretary of State has been saying, why has he not resigned?

Dr Fox: We have made it very clear that, in the areas where the EU already has an agreement, our first aim is continuity. We have also made it very clear that we have further ambition for bespoke agreements with those countries.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): One key part of the Government’s strategy is to build an extensive business-to-business network of exporters. What progress has been made on that? In particular, what role are business organisations playing so that we can foster such a network?

Dr Fox: One of the demands of the business community during the consultation was to give them better online communities so that they can speak to one another. We discovered that businesses did not necessarily want to talk to Government advisers, but wanted much more to speak to those who had faced similar business challenges and to ask how they had overcome them. That is under way, and we have recruited more staff to make that happen.

Foreign Direct Investment

2. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of foreign direct investment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The UK, I am pleased to say, remains the No. 1 destination in Europe for foreign direct investment. We have recently published analyses of the positive economic impact of FDI, which show the benefits of investment to the UK and how the Department is delivering national wealth by attracting investors to our key industries.
Alex Chalk: Foreign direct investment in the UK has been directly responsible for more than half a million jobs since 2010, including hundreds in my constituency. Whatever the shape of future trade policy, will the Minister assure me that, building on that figure, increasing our attractiveness to foreign direct investment remains a priority for this Government?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—it is a priority of this Government to create even more high-paying jobs by making the UK the most business-friendly market in the world. The Labour party’s promise to seize the assets of foreign pension funds invested in the UK threatens our prosperity and the retirement of those around the world who have put their confidence in Britain.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): In the past few years I have often thought that I live on a parallel planet to the Minister. That obviously is the case, because the senior people I meet from the United States, China and other major economies are not investing, or thinking of investing, in the United Kingdom, partly because of the uncertainty over Brexit and because, if we leave the European Union, they want a market of 650 million, not 65 million.

Graham Stuart: I can confirm that the hon. Gentleman does live in a parallel universe, but it is one that he shares with his Front Benchers. His parallel universe is entirely divorced from the reality that investors are coming to the UK. We are the No. 1 foreign direct investment destination in Europe. We have the largest stock, and that is why we have been able to support more than half a million new jobs since 2010. The biggest threat, investors tell me, is that of Labour coming to power.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): During the referendum, “Project Fear” told us that global business interest in the UK would collapse if people voted to leave. Can the Minister confirm whether foreign direct investment has gone up or down since the referendum in June 2016?

Graham Stuart: I am glad to confirm to my hon. Friend that our stock of foreign direct investment has gone up. We remain the No. 1 destination in Europe and are seeing companies in so many sectors coming here. Investors have some concerns about Brexit but, as I have said, what they are really alarmed about is the prospect of Labour seizing their assets and destroying the job creation that investment brings.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): May I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s remarks about Sir Jeremy Heywood?

I was delighted, if somewhat surprised, to see the Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box this morning. He and his Ministers have talked about a record number of FDI investments in the last full year, 2017, but he knows that, in value, it was actually the worst year for inward investment since 1994. Complacently, he celebrates the forecast by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development for the first half of 2018, but he knows that the UNCTAD report states that this reflects “a surge in intra-firm loans”.

These are loans that are often used to minimise tax by creating an artificial debt shield and they create no new jobs in the UK. How many such intra-firm loans are in the FDI statistics, and what assessment has the Minister made of the reduction in tax receipts to the Exchequer as a result?

Graham Stuart: The UNCTAD figures that measure foreign direct investment showed the UK moving above the United States into third in the first six months of this year, but the hon. Gentleman is entirely right to say that they include intra-company loans. Any figures around flow should be treated with caution; the most important thing is the stock of foreign direct investment in this country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said, if we had listened to some, we would have expected divestment. There was no divestment; there were increases in investment. In the last year, if I may deal with what is most important to me and my constituents, there were 75,000 new jobs created by foreign direct investment.

China: Trade and Investment

3. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Chinese Government on increasing bilateral trade and investment. [907611]

7. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What recent discussions he has had on trade and investment with the Chinese Government. [907617]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): I have made five visits to China this year. The most recent was when I led the UK delegation to China’s International Import Expo in Shanghai this month, supporting British firms to sign deals worth over £2 billion.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How are we doing in terms of goods and services, and how does that compare internationally?

Dr Fox: Our ratio of goods and services exports to the world outside the European Union is roughly 50:50. Eighty per cent. of our exports to China are goods, which suggests that the Chinese service market is not as open as it should be. Therefore, much of our effort is based on trying to encourage the Government of China to open up its services, which of course would be of benefit to the United Kingdom, the world’s second biggest services exporter.

Jim Shannon: Let me put on record my thanks for the work that the Minister and others have done to secure the £250 million deal for Lakeland Dairies’ milk products over a five-year period, which secures jobs as well.

In the past 10 years alone, China’s GDP has tripled. What assessment has the Department made of the potential trade and investment opportunities for the UK, with special reference to the agri-food industry?

Dr Fox: We are conducting a joint trade and investment review with China as part of looking ahead to deepen that relationship. Under the UK-China Joint Economic and Trade Commission, we lobby for increased market
access sector by sector. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments; it is not the highest publicity aspect of the Department for International Trade, but opening up a sector worth quarter of a billion pounds to Northern Ireland is a big achievement.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Last year, British exports to China grew by 28%. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of how that trajectory will rise over the next few years?

Dr Fox: We know from a number of consumer surveys that about 60% of Chinese consumers say that they would pay a higher price for produce just because it is made in the United Kingdom. We are associated with the quality end of the global market, which is the rising market in China, and I expect our exports there to continue to grow apace.

Creative Industries

4. Bambo Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What steps he is taking to protect the creative industries in any future trade agreements after the UK leaves the EU.

Dr Fox: We will be leaving the European Union. It is important to note that sometimes the creative industries sector is generally underappreciated for the contribution it makes to the earnings of this country, not only through exports—I mentioned the £40.2 billion of goods and services exports—but through the income it generates for the United Kingdom. It is an important sector, which is why we put it at the heart of not only our industrial policy, but our trade policy.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Society of Authors has called on the Government to ensure that copyright is not used as a bargaining chip in trade negotiations. Any future deals must ensure that international copyright treaties are applied by the book; anything else would risk damaging this important and iconic sector. Will the Secretary of State still be here to reassure British authors, the reading public and other creative industries that our gold standard copyright regime will be protected post Brexit?

Dr Fox: I should probably declare an interest as someone who has published a book and receives royalties, and who takes an interest in copyright. I and all Secretaries of State will be here to ensure that copyrights are protected.

Food and Agricultural Standards

5. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Whether food and agricultural imports will have to meet the same (a) food safety and (b) sanitary and phytosanitary standards as domestic products under new free trade agreements after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The Government have been clear that future imports to the UK must meet UK food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards. We will not compromise our standards in pursuit of a trade agreement.

Daniel Zeichner: The 40 deals to which the hon. Member refers are, of course, the deals that the EU currently has with partners. Our ambition is to transition those trade deals exactly as they are—or at least as closely as possible—and they contain the current measures.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): We not only have really high welfare and hygiene standards, but reduce much antibiotic use by producing good-quality food. Can we be assured that food that does not meet those standards will not come into the country and that those standards will not be frittered away in an agreement on service industries?

George Hollingbery: I can say to my hon. Friend the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that we absolutely have that intention. It is very straightforward. When I am abroad, I find on a regular basis, as the Secretary of State has said, that it is
the commitment to high standards in the UK market that so motivates consumers to buy our products. Not only is having these high standards the right thing to do, but there is no rational commercial incentive to do otherwise.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The so-called backstop would trap Northern Ireland in a common regulatory area under EU rules for our key export industries of manufacturing, agriculture and agri-food. What assessment has the Department made of the impact of that on Northern Ireland's ability to participate in UK-wide trade deals in relation to those key exports?

George Hollingbery: The Government have only just published the withdrawal agreement, which will be before the House shortly, and the Department will assess all issues of that sort in the context of the proposed agreement.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State spoke earlier of how highly regarded UK goods are. That is true of successful exports such as dairy, smoked salmon and vegetables. I noticed that the Minister made a commitment in his initial answer to not dropping our food standards. Given that the United States has made it clear that that is exactly what has to happen to agree any future trade deals, will he now rule out any trade deals, including with the United States, that see any drop in our very high and successful food standards?

George Hollingbery: I can only refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave moments ago. We are scoping potential trade deals with all the partners with whom we have announced that we are seeking to do free trade deals, and our position on these standards remains exactly the same: we will not be changing UK law in this regard.

Automotive Industry

8. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps is he taking to ensure that the UK automotive industry can continue to trade with the EU without disruption after the UK leaves the EU.

9. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that the UK automotive industry can continue to trade with the EU without disruption after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): The UK's automotive sector is one of our strongest industries and, for that reason, it has been at the heart of our negotiations with the EU. The agreement announced last night will protect integrated supply chains and allow the industry to continue to thrive.

Gerald Jones: I would like to press the Minister further. What will the Department do to protect this specific supply chain, which is made up of many hundreds of SMEs across the country?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right, which was why we put the interests of that industry at the heart of our negotiations. That is why the deal provides the supply chain with exactly the continuity needed to ensure its successful growth, and it is why I ask the hon. Gentleman to ensure that he supports it; otherwise, he will be putting all those automotive jobs at risk.

Jessica Morden: The UK's steel sector currently provides a third of our automotive sector's steel requirements. What are Ministers doing to replicate the EU's steel safeguards, which prevent sudden surges of imports, after Brexit?

Graham Stuart: We have set up the Trade Remedies Authority, which I note the Labour party voted against. We have put in place all the measures necessary to ensure that producers are protected from dumping. It was a shame that the Labour party voted against the very measures that sought to protect British jobs, and I do not know why the hon. Lady joined those on her Front Bench in doing so.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister says that he will support all measures to help the supply chain, including small businesses in my constituency, but can he guarantee that he and the Secretary of State will still be in post by lunchtime to defend those industries?

Graham Stuart: It is unfortunate, as was shown by the previous vote, that the Labour party always puts politics ahead of the interests of ordinary people working in the automotive industry across this country. We are seeing more and more investment in this country, with the announcement of a major investment by McLaren in Sheffield only yesterday. Let us not play politics. Let us get the deal over the line and protect our growing and strong automotive industry.

Food and Agricultural Standards

9. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on ensuring that food and agricultural imports meet the same standards as domestic products after the UK has left the EU.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): My ministerial colleagues and I regularly meet our counterparts from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss a range of issues. When it comes to products imported to the UK, quality, safety and performance will continue to be paramount. Without exception, imports must meet all the relevant UK product rules and regulations.

Kerry McCarthy: We have heard quite a few times this morning that there will be no lowering of standards when it comes to imports under future trade deals, but the Government rejected an amendment to the Trade Bill to include a non-regression clause. Will they now support an amendment to the Agriculture Bill, which we will be discussing in Committee later today, that would allow for the same so that we can be sure that our food and our safety standards are protected?

George Hollingbery: I have noted some of the discussions on the Agriculture Bill, which I read earlier today, and I have noted the discussions on this. I have to say, and the hon. Lady should take some real encouragement from...
this fact, that the standards on these issues in the UK are already higher than they are in the EU. That, I think, should give the House confidence as to the UK’s intention on this. I will repeat one more time: there is absolutely no intention that the Government will reduce their standards in this area.

**Gender-responsive Analysis**

11. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If he will ensure that a gender-responsive analysis is conducted at each stage in the development of new trade agreements after the UK leaves the EU. [907621]

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** I am committed to ensuring that UK trade policy supports gender equality. I will be publishing scoping assessments on each new free trade agreement and these will consider the effects of concluding trade deals on different groups, including gender groups.

**Liz McInnes:** I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but what policy measures will he put in place to ensure that the sustainable development goals are met, particularly goal 5 to ensure equality for women and girls?

**Dr Fox:** The hon. Lady raises a very important point. It was one of the points we considered at the World Trade Organisation meeting of Trade Ministers in Buenos Aires. We looked at a study showing that of companies that trade only offline, four out of five are owned or run by men. Of those that run only online, four out of five are run or owned by women. This indicates that e-commerce is one of the prime development tools that we can use. The liberalisation of e-commerce and creating a global network of regulation is therefore one of the best ways we can combine trade and development policy, specifically to help women experience the benefits of the global economy.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [907624] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox):** My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, establishing an independent trade policy and export promotion. Later today, the Board of Trade will meet in Wales for the first time in history, jointly hosted by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. As the President of the Board of Trade, I can today announce a £240 million investment drive in Wales, which will create thousands of jobs. The Board of Trade will also today announce the launch of the UK’s first energy investment portfolio, worth an estimated £5 billion.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Exporting companies in my constituency have told me that the Trade Secretary actually asked to meet them, but on condition that they did not discuss Brexit. Even more ludicrously, the Brexit Secretary—not the one who has just resigned, but the one who resigned before that—also said he wanted to meet them, but on the same condition. It is only £1 to go over Clifton suspension bridge from the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency into Bristol. If I offer to pay that quid for him, will he come to Bristol and tell our exporting companies what the hell is going on?

**Dr Fox:** The companies in Bristol seem to know already what is going on, without requiring any contribution from the hon. Lady—financial or otherwise. They are not only creating huge numbers of jobs, but are among the best export hubs in the whole of the United Kingdom, showing excellence in whole areas from the creative industries to aerospace. She need not worry too much.

T3. [907628] **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend inform the House what plans his Department has to support Small Business Saturday?

**Dr Fox:** There are a number of events up and down the country. I will be hosting events in my own constituency, using the export hub. A number of Members will already have used the hub in their own constituencies. This is a great initiative, and it is a chance for MPs of all parties to show just how much support they give to small businesses. I know that a number of MPs hosted events up and down the country last year. I will be doing so, and I urge my hon. Friend to do so, although I am sure he requires no urging whatsoever. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will use this opportunity to celebrate the success of small business.

T2. [907625] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): A few days ago I met the ambassador of a very large country in the far east. The UK is his country’s trade gateway to the European Union, but clearly it will no longer be that after we have left. How will the Secretary of State safeguard existing business and trade with that country?

**Dr Fox:** We have set out our export and investment strategy, and we are one of the few countries in the world that are seeing a rise in investment at a time when foreign direct investment is dropping by 41%. We currently have one of the biggest increases in exports, and our trade policy and new system of trade commissioners will ensure increased levels of contact with Governments in all countries, including the one that the right hon. Gentleman failed to tell us the name of.

T5. [907628] **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on what further steps are being taken to enable future trade deals?

**The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):** As my hon. Friend will know, the Government have outlined to the House the progress that new free trade deals will make, and consultations on four potential deals were in the public realm from July to October. Those potential deals include the US, Australia, New Zealand and the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, and we are currently in the process of analysing the extensive responses that we received.

T4. [907627] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): European and British companies trading lawfully with Iran may soon face sanctions from the Trump regime, which has withdrawn from the Iran deal. When that happens, will the Secretary of State stand up for British companies, or will he cave in to Trump?
Dr Fox: The United Kingdom is committed to the joint comprehensive plan of action, and we want Iran to derive the economic benefits of that agreement. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are two particular difficulties for British companies. One is access to finance for doing business in Iran, and the second is that it is often difficult for companies to know who the end point they are dealing with is, and whether they may in fact be part of the regime that would require sanctions to be applied. We work with British businesses to try to help them, but we understand that it is a real minefield.

Mr Speaker: Trudy Harrison—not here.

T7. [907631] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Small and medium-sized businesses often find it difficult to export because of the rules and regulations in many of the countries they export to. What more help can my right hon. Friend's Department give to those companies of the countries they export to. What more help can my right hon. Friend's Department give to those companies to get access to those markets? Growing our exports is great for our economy.

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes a useful point, and we have identified 400,000 businesses that could be exporting but do not because of their fear, or lack of understanding, of the markets to which they would export, and their cultural and regulatory frameworks. That is why we have established the framework of our trade commissioners around the world, and why we have put members of UK Export Finance in those markets, so that they can gain expertise in the financial areas that companies will enter, and will be there to advise companies in those markets.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The north-east is the only region in the country that still exports more than it imports. That involves large companies such as Nissan, as well as many great small start-ups and businesses that cannot afford expensive lawyers or management consultants. What specific guidance is available to those companies on how to continue and increase trading post-Brexit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): That is why we have the export strategy and we have worked with industry, which has been welcomed by small business groups and others. With staff in 108 countries around the world, and our regional and sector teams, we are working harder than ever before to ensure that the information flow, and the advice and opportunities for small businesses, is advertised in a better and more effective way than ever before. [Interruption.] Despite the hon. Lady's laughter, that is why last year our exports grew by more than 10% to £617 billion, and they are now more than £630 billion and counting.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Misogyny

1. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle misogynistic behaviour.

[907632]

2. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on women.

[907633]
**The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma):** Universal credit treats all individuals equally, irrespective of gender. It provides one-to-one support and incentives to help claimants progress in work. The latest Office for National Statistics labour market statistics show a near record high rate for women in employment.

**Tommy Sheppard:** The Minister will know that universal credit pays less to lone parents under 25 than the current legacy benefits. Given that 90% of young lone parents are women, surely that is a clear and blatant case of discrimination against them. Will the Minister speak to the new Work and Pensions Secretary to ask for a review of this policy?

**Alok Sharma:** We support everyone on the universal credit system, including lone parents. As the hon. Gentleman will know, in the Budget we announced an extra £4.5 billion of support which included increasing work allowances, and childcare support is available for parents of young children.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the £1.7 billion announced in the Budget to increase work allowances for families with children, which will mean that 2.4 million families will be better off?

**Alok Sharma:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I always find it interesting when Opposition Members talk about helping their constituents. Sadly, what they do not then do is vote in the Lobby to support the policies designed to help those very people.

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, we listened to organisations that work in the area of domestic abuse and introduced split payments. Will the Minister consider what has happened in Northern Ireland? It is a low-cost, no-cost option. Will he consider introducing it to ensure a safety net for those people who are in abusive and controlling relationships?

**Alok Sharma:** As the hon. Lady knows, split payments are available under universal credit. It is very important that if any individuals are facing the sort of abuse she talks about, we need to be able to signpost them to additional support. We give training to our work coaches to allow them to do that.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Universal credit comes to Castlemilk in my constituency next month, where there is a women’s group supporting women who have fled or who are living with domestic violence. They are deeply, deeply concerned about universal credit coming. Will a Minister please come to Castlemilk to meet these groups of women?

**Alok Sharma:** I go up and down the country to jobcentres, and I will, of course, go to Scotland in due course, but what I hope the hon. Gentleman will do in turn is talk to local jobcentres in his area and seek that assurance as well for his constituents.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): The reality is this: women who work, women without children, women with children, disabled women, black, Asian and minority ethnic women and women fleeing domestic violence have all been punished by universal credit. Report after report has issued stark warnings about the design of universal credit and its impact on survivors, but the Government refuse to listen. Instead, they make claims about a landmark domestic abuse Bill, while their policies, staff and systems are failing to protect survivors. It makes no sense. Will the Minister show some compassion when he gets to his feet and halt the roll-out of universal credit until it is fixed?

**Alok Sharma:** We are keen to support everyone who is coming on to universal credit. That is why earlier this year we introduced £1.5 billion of support. In the Budget, we had another net £4.5 billion of support produced. With respect, I say to the hon. Lady that if she wants to help her constituents, she should vote for the measures whereby we put more money into the system.

**Equality Act 2010: Commencement of Section 106**

3. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Whether she has made a recent assessment of the potential merits of commencing section 106 of the Equality Act 2010; and if she will make a statement. [907634]

**The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins):** We keep any uncommenced provisions from the Equality Act under review. Equality is never a one-time fix and it is right that we keep re-examining these issues. However, political parties are responsible for their candidate selection and should lead the way in improving diverse representation.

**Bambos Charalambous:** Gender pay gap reporting has ensured transparency across the board and resulted in companies taking action. Section 106 could have the same effect, so will the Minister consult those parties on its introduction?

**Victoria Atkins:** I hope that every party is looking at this legislation. Certainly, the Conservative party is looking at how we can gather this information, not just for the national Parliament but for local government, because we believe it is absolutely essential that local government reflects the society it serves as much as this House does.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): I know that the Minister has committed to increasing the number of women in Parliament. Does she agree that we have a woman Prime Minister and strong women Secretaries of State, such as the woman beside her at the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State for International Development, who should be congratulated on the support and the leadership they show to women across the country?

**Victoria Atkins:** I think it is 2-0 to us. This is a serious point. In the Labour party, there are many, many strong, capable women I have very good working relationships with. It is a great shame that the Labour party has never managed yet to entrust the leadership of its party to a woman—[Interruption.] I see somebody volunteering on the Opposition Front Bench. We have the opportunity to bring more women into this Parliament through an event next week, on 21 November, when every Member of Parliament can bring a woman into the House of Commons and invite them to stand in this House.
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): A number of single parents have accessed the advance payment service under universal credit. However, as a result, they have found that the payments are required to be repaid in 15 months, or with 40% of their entitlement reclaimed. What will the Government do to ensure that many are not falling further into financial hardship as a result of advance payments under universal credit?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. The only difficulty with her question is that it does not seem altogether aligned with, or even adjacent to, the subject matter on the Order Paper. Her supplementary question would have been entirely pertinent to Question 2, but I am going to imagine that she has a great interest in section 106 of the Equality Act and that there is some sort of link, unknown to me but known to clever people like Ministers.

Victoria Atkins: I am very interested by the hon. Lady’s question—I am so interested that I am going to ask the responsible Minister to write to her in due course. But I make the point that the more female Members of Parliament we have in the House, the more they can scrutinise this legislation.

Mr Speaker: Very wise, very deft—we are very grateful to the Minister.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What justification is there for an eight-year delay in the implementation of section 106?

Victoria Atkins: The Government have kept that under review, but, as I said earlier, it is also for political parties themselves to act on it, so I am pleased that the Conservative party is looking into how we can gather the evidence in order to improve diversity in our candidates list.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a certain amount of gesticulation from a sedentary position. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) is signalling that the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) wanted to come in on Question 2. I am sorry if she has been inconvenienced, but she needed to bob on Question 2, not Question 3. But never mind; she has made her point with considerable force and alacrity, and it is on the record. I would call her again, but she is entitled to only one. However, she has made her point very clearly, and we are extremely grateful.

Domestic Abuse Survivors: Workplace Policy

4. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): If the Government will take steps to ensure that companies put in place workplace policies to support survivors of domestic abuse and reduce its effect on the workplace.

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Government are committed to transforming their approach to domestic abuse, and that includes improving the response of employers to this devastating crime. We have therefore awarded £1 million to the charity Hestia for its “Tools for the Job” pilot project, which will help employers to improve their HR policies on domestic abuse and will fund specialist employment domestic violence advocates. We are also working closely with the employers initiative, which does similar work.

Christian Matheson: Victims of domestic abuse and violence tell us that a short period of leave from work while they manage to sort out the difficulties in their lives would be helpful. Will the Minister agree to meet employers and trade unions to discuss the possibility of introducing paid leave for victims of domestic violence?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I keep pointing out to employers that having policies that can help to identify and support victims of domestic abuse in their workforces makes not only good moral sense but good business sense. I should be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman, and employers and trade unions, to discuss what more we can do to help.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Of course, domestic violence affects not just women but men, too; but what contact has my hon. Friend had with companies such as the John Lewis Partnership, whose chief executive takes particular interest in such issues?

Victoria Atkins: We tend to focus on women as being the victims of domestic abuse because the statistics show us that it is a gendered crime, but I never forget the fact that, of course, men can be the victims of domestic abuse. That is why we are doing a great deal of work, both through the domestic violence and abuse Bill and through non-legislative measures, to support them and ensure that services are there for them.

I am sure that the John Lewis Partnership is part of the employers initiative, a piece of work in which I am very involved and about which I am very enthusiastic. I should be delighted to support John Lewis not just in a spending capacity, but in a legislative capacity as well.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): When I recently visited a Leeds Women’s Aid hostel, which does fantastic work throughout my city, it raised the problems experienced by women in low-paid work in accessing emergency accommodation. What support can the Government give to ensure that women feel confident enough to leave violent relationships and seek support?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has raised an extremely important point. There have been more refuge places since 2010 under this Government, and in the summer we reconfirmed the funding arrangements for refuges. When I visit refuges, which are incredibly important places for women who need to flee very dangerous situations, what I hear from those women is that they would like to have that support at an earlier stage so that they do not have to be the ones who leave—so that he leaves, rather than her—and we are working on that as well.

Gender Pay Gap

5. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What progress the Government have made on reducing the gender pay gap.

[907637]
6. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What progress the Government have made on closing the gender pay gap. [907638]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It’s me again!

It is encouraging that the national gender pay gap is at its narrowest ever, but it will take time and action by employers if we are to close it entirely. I am thrilled that more than 10,000 employers reported their gender pay gaps this year, but that is just the first step. We are now working with employers to help them to understand their gender pay gaps and what plans they could make to close them.

Alex Chalk: Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Does my hon. Friend agree that not just 10,000 employers but 100% of all eligible employers have reported their data and that that provides a baseline on which future progress can be measured and recorded?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, who is a committed feminist on this subject. Interestingly, not only have more than 10,000 businesses had to have this conversation about how they treat women in their workplace, but we know it is having a trickle-down effect on employers who do not necessarily meet the threshold. I know from the conversations that I have had with business leaders that they understand: the will is there for them to change. They want to do so, and they want to do so in partnership with us in government.

Christine Jardine: Given the early signs of the success of mandatory gender pay reporting for large businesses, has the Minister considered extending pay transparency to tackle wider inequalities, as recommended by the Institute for Public Policy Research, such as requiring companies with 50 or more employees to report not just on gender pay, but ethnicity and disability gaps?

Victoria Atkins: A huge amount of work is going on, and as the hon. Lady rightly says, the focus this year has been on gender inequality, but we are extending it to ethnic diversity and so on. Interestingly, we have just announced that we are consulting on whether businesses should publicise their parental leave policies to help women and carers.

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11. [907645] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps are the Government taking to mitigate the effects of the rising retirement age for the millions of women who will have accrued less in their pension pot due to the gender pay gap? [Interruption.]

Victoria Atkins: Forgive me if I have had not heard the hon. Gentleman correctly because of the hubbub in the Chamber; it is wonderful that everybody is so excited about women and equalities today.

The gender pay gap for women between the ages of 40 and 49 has fallen since 2010, but we published the “Fuller Working Lives” strategy last year and continue to work with businesses to ensure that everyone can adapt to the changing face of the workplace.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is disappointing that the Government rejected the Women and Equalities Committee recommendation of a cross-departmental race equality strategy. Can the Minister at least commit to making the reporting of a race pay gap compulsory, in line with the gender pay gap?

Victoria Atkins: As I have said, a great deal of work is going on, and I had a meeting earlier this year on exactly this point and look forward in due course to working with my colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on how we can close these gaps as well.

Business Start-ups

7. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to encourage more women to start their own businesses. [907640]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government-owned British Business Bank provides start-up loans for new entrepreneurs, and women account for 39% of recipients. The bank is also conducting a review into specific barriers female-led businesses face in accessing venture capital. All entrepreneurs in England can access advice and support from growth hubs and business support helplines, and 45% of the helpline users were women in 2017-18.

Theresa Villiers: Will my hon. Friend welcome the work of the entrepreneur Alison Cork in setting up the Make It Your Business network to support women who want to start their own businesses, including a branch in my constituency, Chipping Barnet?

Kelly Tolhurst: I welcome such initiatives that encourage and support women to start their own businesses, and I also appreciate the work of my right hon. Friend’s constituent Alison Cork. Connecting people and building networks is an important part of supporting entrepreneurs. That is why the Chancellor announced in the autumn Budget another £20 million to strengthen local networks.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Many women experience debilitating symptoms during the menopause, with 72% saying they feel completely unsupported at work during this time. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can make the necessary legislative changes so that these women feel supported?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is a champion for all things around women, and I would be happy to meet her at some stage to talk about her particular concerns.

Women in Parliament: Centenary

8. **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What plans the Government have to mark the 100th anniversary of women being allowed to stand for Parliament. [907641]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt) rose—

Hon. Members: Resign.

Penny Mordaunt: I know my duty, and at 10 am this morning, it was to be in this House answering questions. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We must do the Minister the courtesy of hearing her.
Penny Mordaunt: The Government Equalities Office will be holding a conference to celebrate the centenary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918 on 21 November 2018. The GEO is also providing financial assistance to ensure that every MP in this House can invite a woman constituent into Parliament for the day, and I hope that all MPs will be doing that.

Chris Davies: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. It was great to see female MPs from around the globe pledge to support one another’s fight for gender equality recently. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on that first ever meeting of women MPs from every Parliament around the world?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. One of the outcomes of that day, alongside the issues that the women discussed, was the desire expressed by me and the other host of the event that those women should form a lasting network to support one another in fighting for gender equality around the world.

Budget 2018

9. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of Budget 2018 on women. [907642]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): As a result of meeting the commitments to raise the personal allowance to £12,500 and the higher rate threshold to £50,000 one year early, 13.6 million women will see their income tax bill reduced in 2019-20 and 1 million women will be taken out of income tax altogether.

Mr Speaker: Topical questions. I call Alan Mak.

Alan Mak: Across all parties, nearly 50% of Havant Borough Council’s councillors are now women. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to encourage more women to stand for election at local government level?

Penny Mordaunt: The women’s centenary suffrage fund supports initiatives across England to engage women in local democracy. We will also be funding an Ask Her to Stand event. We funded one in July that was attended by more than 300 women, many of whom were interested in becoming councillors. I congratulate my hon. Friend’s borough on the progress that it has made.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I am pleased that the Minister for Women’s duty was to be here at 10 o’clock. I wonder whether that will still be the case at 11 o’clock. A shocking new report on maternity support for female offenders by Dr Laura Abbott, a specialist midwife and academic, has highlighted a real gap between what is recognised as being needed and what is actually provided for pregnant women in prison. Can the House be assured that specific mandatory provision for pregnant women and new mothers in prison will be included in any future framework?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The hon. Lady raises an important point. We know that quite often the care given to female offenders in prison does fall short, and I will look at the specific issue that she raises. Clearly, we need to ensure that the best maternity support is given to them.

T3. [907649] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): There are now more than 1 million women-led small and medium-sized businesses in the UK—women such as my constituent Erin Rodgers, who set up Our Little Globe, an educational subscription box that aims to teach young children about the world and the people in it. New businesses such as Erin’s need financial support in the initial stages to grow. Will my hon. Friend outline what support is available for women wanting to start their own businesses?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for highlighting her constituent Erin Rodgers. The Government support offer is available to all those wishing to grow a business, regardless of their age, gender or ethnicity. We back the Start Up Loans Company, which has been providing funding and incentives to support new entrepreneurs since 2012. It has delivered loans totalling £446 million, 39% of which went to women. I wish Our Little Globe every success for the future.
EU Exit Negotiations

10.30 am

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, I would like to update the House on our negotiations to leave the European Union. First, I want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) and for Tatton (Ms McVey). Delivering Brexit involves difficult choices for all of us. We do not agree on all of those choices, but I respect their views, and I would like to thank them sincerely for all that they have done.

Yesterday we agreed the provisional terms of our exit from the European Union, set out in the draft withdrawal agreement. We also agreed the broad terms of our future relationship, in an outline political declaration. President Juncker has now written to the President of the European Council to recommend that “decisive progress has been made in the negotiations.” A special European Council will be called for Sunday 25 November. This puts us close to a Brexit deal.

What we agreed yesterday was not the final deal. It is a draft treaty that means that we will leave the EU in a smooth and orderly way on 29 March 2019 and sets the framework for a future relationship that delivers in our national interest. It takes back control of our borders, laws and money, it protects jobs, security and the integrity of the United Kingdom, and it delivers in ways that many said could simply not be done.

We were told that we had a binary choice between the model of Norway or the model of Canada—that we could not have a bespoke deal. But the outline political declaration sets out an arrangement that is better for our country than both of these—a more ambitious free trade agreement than the EU has with any other country. We were told we would be treated like any other third country on security co-operation, but the outline political declaration sets out a breadth and depth of co-operation beyond anything the EU has agreed with any other country.

Let me take the House through the details. First, on the withdrawal agreement, the full legal text has now been agreed in principle. It sets out the terms on which the UK will leave the EU in 134 days’ time, on 29 March 2019. We have secured the rights of the more than 3 million EU citizens living in the UK and around 1 million UK nationals living in the EU. We have agreed a time-limited implementation period that ensures businesses only have to plan for one set of changes. We have agreed protocols to ensure Gibraltar and the sovereign base areas are covered by the withdrawal agreement, and we have agreed a fair financial settlement—far lower than the figures many mentioned at the start of this process.

Since the start of this process, I have been committed to ensuring that our exit from the EU deals with the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I believe this issue can best be solved through our future relationship with the European Union, but the withdrawal agreement sets out an insurance policy should that new relationship not be ready in time for the end of the implementation period. I do not pretend that this has been a comfortable process or that either we or the EU are entirely happy with all of the arrangements that have been included, but of course that is the case—this is an arrangement that we have both said we never want to have to use. But while some people might pretend otherwise, there is no deal that delivers the Brexit the British people voted for that does not involve this insurance policy—not Canada plus plus plus plus, not “Norway for now,” not our own White Paper. The EU will not negotiate any future partnership without it.

As the House knows, the original proposal from the EU was not acceptable as it would have meant creating a customs border down the Irish sea and breaking up the integrity of our United Kingdom, so last month I set out for the House the four steps we needed to take. This is what we have now done, and it has seen the EU make a number of concessions towards our position.

First, the EU proposal for a Northern Ireland-only customs solution has been dropped and replaced with a new UK-wide temporary customs arrangement that protects the integrity of our precious Union.

Secondly, we have created an option for a single time-limited extension of the implementation period as an alternative to bringing in the backstop. As I have said many times, I do not want to extend the implementation period and I do not believe we will need to do so. This is about an insurance policy, but if it happens that at the end of 2020 our future relationship is not quite ready, the UK will be able to make a choice between the UK-wide temporary customs arrangement or a short extension of the implementation period.

Thirdly, the withdrawal agreement commits both parties to use best endeavours to ensure that this insurance policy is never used, and in the unlikely event that it is needed, if we choose the backstop, the withdrawal agreement is explicit that the backstop is temporary and that the article 50 legal base cannot provide for a permanent relationship. There is also a mechanism by which the backstop can be terminated.

Finally, we have ensured full continued access for Northern Ireland’s businesses to the whole of the UK internal market.

The Brexit talks are about acting in the national interest, and that means making what I believe to be the right choices, not the easy ones. I know there are some who have said I should simply rip up the UK’s commitment to a backstop, but this would have been an entirely irresponsible course of action. It would have meant reneging on a promise made to the people of Northern Ireland during the referendum campaign and afterwards—that under no circumstances would Brexit lead to a return to the borders of the past—and it would have made it impossible to deliver a withdrawal agreement. As Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, I have a responsibility to people in every part of our country, and I intend to honour that promise.

By resolving this issue, we are now able to move on to finalising the details of an ambitious future partnership. The outline political declaration we have agreed sets out the basis for these negotiations, and we will negotiate intensively ahead of the European Council to turn this into a full future framework.

The declaration will end free movement once and for all. Instead we will have our own new skills-based immigration system, based not on the country people come from but on what they can contribute to the UK. The declaration agrees the creation of a free trade area for goods, with zero tariffs and no fees, charges or quantitative restrictions, across all goods sectors. No other major advanced economy has such an arrangement
with the EU and, at the same time, we will also be free to strike new trade deals with other partners around the world.

We have also reached common ground on a close relationship on services and investment, including financial services, which goes well beyond World Trade Organisation commitments. The declaration ensures that we will be leaving the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, so we will decide how best to sustain and support our farms and our environment, and the UK will become an independent coastal state once again.

We have also reached agreement on key elements of our future security partnership to keep our people safe. This includes swift and effective extradition arrangements, as well as arrangements for effective data exchange on passenger name records, DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data. We have also have agreed a close and flexible partnership on foreign, security and defence policy.

When I first became Prime Minister in 2016 there was no ready-made blueprint for Brexit. Many people said it could simply not be done. I have never accepted that. I have been committed day and night to delivering on the result of the referendum and ensuring the UK leaves the EU absolutely and on time. But I also said at the very start that withdrawing from EU membership after 40 years, and establishing a wholly new relationship that will endure for decades to come, would be complex and require hard work. I know that it has been a frustrating process—it has forced us to confront some very difficult issues—but a good Brexit, a Brexit which is in the national interest, is possible.

We have persevered and have made a decisive breakthrough. Once a final deal is agreed, I will bring it to Parliament, and I will ask MPs to consider the national interest and give it their backing. Voting against a deal would take us all back to square one. It would mean more uncertainty, more division and a failure to deliver on the decision of the British people that we should leave the EU. If we get behind a deal, we can bring our country back together and seize the opportunities that lie ahead.

The British people want us to get this done and to get on with addressing the other issues they care about: creating more good jobs in every part of the UK; doing more to help families with the cost of living; helping our NHS to provide first-class care and our schools to give every child a great start in life; and focusing every ounce of our energy on building a brighter future for our country.

So the choice is clear: we can choose to leave with no deal; we can risk no Brexit at all; or we can choose to unite and support the best deal that can be negotiated—this deal. It is a deal that ends free movement; takes back control of our borders, laws and money; delivers a free trade area for goods with zero tariffs; leaves the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy; delivers an independent foreign and defence policy; while retaining the continued security co-operation to keep our people safe; maintains shared commitments to high standards; protects jobs; honours the integrity of our United Kingdom; and delivers the Brexit the British people voted for. I choose to deliver for the British people. I choose to do what is in our national interest. And I commend this statement to the House.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

The withdrawal agreement and the outline political declaration represent a huge and damaging failure. After two years of bungled negotiations, the Government have produced a botched deal that breaches the Prime Minister’s own red lines and does not meet our six tests. The Government are in chaos. Their deal risks leaving the country in an indefinite halfway house, without a real say. When even the last Brexit Secretary, who, theoretically at least, negotiated the deal, says that “I cannot support the proposed deal”, what faith does that give anyone else in this place or in this country? The Government simply cannot put to Parliament this half-baked deal that both the Brexit Secretary and his predecessor have rejected. No deal is not a real option, and the Government have not seriously prepared for it. The Government must publish their full legal advice, the Treasury a full economic impact assessment of the deal and the Office for Budget Responsibility an updated economic forecast.

The withdrawal agreement is a leap in the dark—an ill-defined deal by a never defined date. There is no mention of the Prime Minister’s favoured term “implementation period” anywhere in the 585 pages of this document. And no wonder, as there is precious little new to implement spelled out in either the agreement or the political declaration. Article 3 of the agreement states that transition can be extended to end by “31 December 20XX”. Can the Prime Minister confirm that this permits an extension to be rolled on until 2099?

Can the Prime Minister confirm that if the UK Government cannot agree a comprehensive future relationship by January 2021, which few believe will be possible and which the last two years give us no confidence the Government can do, those negotiations would have to be put on hold, because the focus would then inevitably shift from negotiations on the future relationship to those on an extension of the transition period, including further payments to the EU? Article 132 sets out that process fairly clearly.

How confident is the Prime Minister that a deal can be done by the end of 2020, and can she confirm that if a new trade agreement is not agreed by 31 December 2020, article 132 will apply—meaning our paying a huge financial contribution to extend the transition period—if we are to avoid triggering the backstop, as the Prime Minister insists is her position? Should the backstop come into force, there would be no time limit or end point, and if either party requested a review and there was no agreement, it would go to independent arbitration. The backstop locks Britain into a deal it cannot leave without the agreement of the EU. Restrictions on state aid are hardwired into the backstop, with an arbitration mechanism, but no such guarantee exists for workers’ rights.

Can the Prime Minister confirm that the backstop applies separate regulatory rules to Northern Ireland, creating a de facto border down the Irish sea, as Northern Ireland would be subject to the customs union but the rest of the UK would not? That is despite the fact that the Prime Minister said this was something “no UK Prime Minister could ever agree to”—[Official Report, 28 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 823.]
It is another of her red lines breached. In fact, the list of EU measures that continue to apply to the UK in respect of Northern Ireland runs to 68 pages of the agreement. This affects VAT declarations and rules of origin checks.

Moreover, it is clear that the Prime Minister's red line regarding the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice has also been torn up. By 2021, under the Prime Minister's plan, we will either be in a backstop or still be in transition, continuing to contribute to the EU budget and to follow the rules overseen by the ECJ. It is utterly far-fetched for the Prime Minister to say this plan means we take control over our laws, money and borders.

After two years of negotiation, all the Government have really agreed is a vague seven-page outline of political declarations, which looks like a substantial dilution of the Prime Minister's previously declared negotiating priorities. There is only the scantiest mention of workers' rights, consumers' rights and environmental protection; there is no determination to achieve frictionless trade, or even trade as frictionless as possible; and no ambition to negotiate a new comprehensive customs union that would protect trade, jobs and industry, so uncertainty continues for businesses and all those who work in them. That risks investment decisions being deferred even further, costing jobs and living standards. Many companies might decide that the lack of certainty simply means they themselves will Brexit. There is no clear plan to get a strong deal with the single market to ensure continued access to European markets and services, merely a vague commitment to go beyond the baseline of the World Trade Organisation. The First Ministers of Wales and Scotland made it clear to the Prime Minister that participation in a customs union to protect the economy and jobs was essential.

Likewise, there is no ambition to achieve continuation of European arrest warrant or an equivalent, and no clarity on our status with Europol, Eurojust or even the Galileo project. There is no clarity either on a future agreement. This affects VAT declarations and rules of origin checks.

The Brexit Secretary promised a “substantive” document; he is obviously no longer here, so can the Prime Minister inform the House of when that detailed framework agreement will be with us?

This is not the deal that the country was promised, and Parliament cannot, and I believe will not, accept a false choice between this bad deal and no deal. People around the country will be feeling anxious this morning—about the industries they work in, the jobs they hold and the stability of their communities and their country. The Government must now withdraw this half-baked deal, which it is clear does not have the backing of the Cabinet, this Parliament or the country as a whole.

The Prime Minister: Let me pick up some of the points that the right hon. Gentleman made. First, he said that no deal was not an option, but then complained that we were not preparing for no deal. Actually, we have been preparing for no deal, and we continue to prepare for no deal, because I recognise that we obviously have a further stage of negotiation with the European Council and then, when that deal is finalised with the European Council, it has to come back to this House. So we will continue those preparations.

The right hon. Gentleman said that the withdrawal agreement is ill defined. Five hundred pages of detailed legal text on the withdrawal agreement is not an ill-defined withdrawal agreement. He complained that the withdrawal agreement does not refer to the implementation period. Of course, it does refer to the transition period, which is exactly the same period of time.

The right hon. Gentleman then talked about the whole question of the decision on the backstop and the implementation period as coming at the end of 2020. Well, if he looks again at the documents that have been produced, he will see that actually the decision will be taken in June 2020 as to whether it is likely that the future relationship will not be in place on 1 January 2021. At that point, it will be for the UK to decide whether it wishes to extend the implementation period for a limited period, or whether it wishes to go into the backstop.

In relation to the question of workers’ rights, there is reference to non-regression.

The right hon. Gentleman says that the outline political declaration does not refer to what we are proposing in terms of a free trade area for the future; in fact, the protocol explicitly does reference that. It sets out very clearly that we will be creating a free trade area between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

I am really not sure what document the right hon. Gentleman has read, because he said that there were no references to extradition. He also said that there was nothing about Europol, whereas there is an express reference that we will be including in the future document:

“Terms for the United Kingdom’s cooperation via Europol and Eurojust.”

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is indeed a choice before Members of this House: it is a choice of whether or not we go ahead with a deal that does deliver on the vote while protecting jobs, our security and our Union. Of course, what he wants is for us to stay in the single market and the customs union. That would not deliver on the vote of the referendum. We are delivering an end to free movement, coming out of the common agricultural policy and out of the common fisheries policy, and we are taking back control of our money, borders and laws. That is the right deal for Britain, and it is the deal that we will be putting forward before this House.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It has always been a Brexiteer illusion that the country can leave the European Union treaties while selecting to retain all the benefits that we enjoy under the treaties and repudiating most, if not all, of the obligations. We have to face up to the fact that that is an illusion. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that the biggest single economic benefit—in fact most of the main economic benefits—that we have enjoyed from our membership over the last decades flow from the completely open
border between the whole of the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union and that upon which have been based huge flows of inward investment, the creation of just-in-time lines of supply and very many thousands of jobs in this country? So will she undertake not to change the present basis of that, which is the single market and the customs union, until we know what we are changing to and until we are satisfied that any change will retain those benefits and keep us completely open from any delays and costs caused by regulatory differences or anything else that would be created by moving away from where we are now? The economic future of this country will be threatened very considerably if we just decide, unilaterally, to walk out, as some of my colleagues seem prepared to recommend.

The Prime Minister: We have indeed heard from business a very clear message about the importance of frictionless borders, which is precisely why the proposal that the United Kingdom has put forward to the European Union is based on that concept of frictionless borders. The free trade area that we have put forward is precisely in that frame. My right hon. and learned Friend talks about remaining in the single market and the customs union. I do not believe that is right for the future of the United Kingdom, because I do not believe that doing those things would deliver on the vote of the British people. There are various things that underpinned the vote. An end to free movement was crucial among those, and remaining in the customs union does not enable us to have an independent trade policy. I believe it is important that we do have an independent trade policy once we have left the European Union. We are negotiating the basis of our future trading relationship, but it is based on the concept of a free trade area and precisely the point that he makes about being able to move goods seamlessly across the border.

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

The Prime Minister: The Prime Minister comes before us today trying to sell us a deal that is already dead in the water. Not even her own Brexit Secretary could stand over it. Now, to lose one Brexit Secretary is one thing, but to lose two in a matter of months illuminates the chaotic nature of this Tory Government. The No. 10 front door has become a revolving one. The Prime Minister talks about taking back control. She cannot even control her own Cabinet. As I said yesterday, she is desperate and is taking back control. She cannot even control her own Brexit Secretary could stand over it. Now, to statement.

We are very grateful for your sedentary observations, Mr Graham, but I do not think that they greatly add to the quality of our deliberations. Everybody will be heard.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Leader of the Scottish National party must be heard and heard with courtesy. We are very grateful for your sedentary observations, Mr Graham, but I do not think that they greatly add to the quality of our deliberations. Everybody will be heard.

Ian Blackford: Not once have Scotland’s unique characteristics in the devolved settlement been worthy of mention. There are 100 mentions of Northern Ireland, mentions of Gibraltar, of Cyprus and of the Isle of Man, but no reference to Scotland. Utter contempt has again been shown to the Scottish Government, their Parliament and its people.

Differentiated deals for Northern Ireland means that Scotland can have its own differentiated deal. If Northern Ireland can stay in the single market, why not Scotland, Prime Minister? The Scottish Government have published compromise documents calling for just this and the Scottish Parliament has affirmed that position. Why does the Prime Minister ignore the democratically expressed position of the Scottish Government? What has happened to the claim of a partnership of equals? Why are the desires of Scotland being ignored, when we know that a differentiated settlement can be delivered? Why does the Prime Minister stand in the face of the legitimate demands of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament?

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was within the documents is that, in order to ensure frictionless trade across the border between Northern Ireland and
Ireland, Northern Ireland will be meeting those regulations specifically in the goods part of the acquis, but it is not remaining a member of the single market. He talks about Scotland being given the same treatment as Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has a very particular set of circumstances. It is the only part of the United Kingdom that will have a land border with a country that is continuing as a member of the European Union. That is why, together with our commitments in the Belfast agreement, Northern Ireland is dealt with separately in the withdrawal agreement.

Finally, much of the right hon. Gentleman’s question was a complaint that Scotland was not specifically mentioned in these documents. Scotland is not specifically mentioned; Scotland is a part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I have always wished my right hon. Friend well, and my question is in this light. I have deep misgivings, on reading much of this document overnight, about the way that we will be treated with the backstop.

When we read this, we realise that we are locking ourselves into an arrangement from which we seem unable, therefore, to have the sovereign right to withdraw. That seems to me to be the biggest single issue here, which strips away the thing that we said when we wanted a vote to leave, which was that we took back control. I say to my right hon. Friend that my concern is that we have the sovereign right when we want to leave the UN; we have the sovereign right when we want to leave NATO; we have even the sovereign right when we want to leave the EU; but we do not have the sovereign right to leave this arrangement.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend says that the references to the backstop raise some difficult issues. I fully accept that they raise some difficult issues. I fully accept that, across the House, there are concerns in relation to the backstop—indeed, I share some of those concerns. These have not been easy decisions to take. It has been necessary, as I explained, and it would be necessary in any deal that we struck for our future relationship with the European Union, to agree a withdrawal agreement. We wanted to commit to ensure that we delivered no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and it has been clear that that withdrawal agreement needed to include this insurance policy.

My right hon. Friend talks about being held in the backstop. First, the backstop is not necessarily what will happen because we want to ensure that the future relationship is in place before the backstop is necessary. Secondly, in the circumstance that a temporary interim period was needed before the future relationship came into place, we would be able to choose a preference between the backstop and the extension of the implementation period. There are pros and cons on both sides of the argument and there will be Members who believe that one is better than the other.

There is a mechanism for coming out of the protocol if the backstop is in place. My right hon. Friend is right: that mechanism does require mutual consent. It is for both sides to agree that—I make no bones about that. However, it enables the backstop to be replaced in a number of circumstances, first and crucially if the future relationship supersedes it. Originally, that was the only point at which it could be superseded; now, alternative arrangements could replace it. But I repeat what I have always said: it is my intention to work to ensure that such an arrangement is not necessary and we are able to go into our future relationship when we come out of the implementation period.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister rightly asserts that there are two alternatives to her plan: no deal and no Brexit. The Government are making considerable investment in contingency planning for no deal. What contingency planning is she doing for no Brexit, including, for example, advising the Commission that article 50 may have to be withdrawn, and she herself preparing for the fact—however much she hates it—that the House may instruct her to carry out a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asks what plans we are making for no Brexit. We are making no plans for no Brexit, because this Government are going to deliver on the vote of the British people.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): If we took the best part of £39 billion over the next couple of years and spent it on public services and tax cuts, would that not be a wonderful boost to our economy and the public mood, and would it not be a better way of spending the money than buying 21 months—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is extremely discourteous. The right hon. Gentleman has a right to be heard without being shouted down while he is speaking. I invite him to begin his question again and to deliver it in full.

John Redwood: Mr Speaker, I was saying, would it not be a wonderful boost to our economy and our public services if we spent that money on ourselves, rather than on 21 months of delay, massive business uncertainty and something that would sour the political and the public mood for the whole period?

The Prime Minister: As I said at a very early stage of the negotiations, the United Kingdom is a country that meets its legal obligations. That says a great deal about the sort of country we are. There are legal obligations. As I said in my statement, the sum of money my right hon. Friend refers to is considerably less than the European Union was originally proposing we would be required to pay as part of the financial settlement. But I remain firmly of the view that we as a country should ensure that we continue to meet our legal obligations, and we will do so.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I could stand here today and take the Prime Minister through the list of promises and pledges that she made to this House, and to us privately, about the future of Northern Ireland in the future relationship with the EU, but I fear it would be a waste of time, since she clearly does not listen.

This House and every Member in it now has a clear choice. The House has been left in a position where the choice is subjection to the rules and laws of others who may not have our interests at heart. In terms of Northern Ireland and our precious Union, five who have resigned...
today have all talked about the threat to the integrity of the Union. I congratulate them on and praise them for what they have said and done, and their strong actions.

As has just been said, this is £39 billion for nothing. The choice is now clear: we stand up for the United Kingdom—the whole United Kingdom and the integrity of the United Kingdom—or we vote for a vassal state, with the break-up of the United Kingdom. That is the choice.

The Prime Minister: I will respond to the right hon. Gentleman. He is right that he and I have had many discussions on this issue, and I hope that we will continue to be able to have many discussions on this issue. We have ensured throughout the negotiations that the border in Northern Ireland has been one of the key issues that we have been addressing.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to the commitments I made in terms of Northern Ireland and the future relationship. Those commitments remain absolutely. We are looking to ensure that we have the frictionless trade across borders that will enable us to not only deliver on our commitment for Northern Ireland, but ensure that we have frictionless trade between the United Kingdom and the whole of the rest of the European Union. Many aspects of the deal that we have agreed actually ensure that we are preserving the integrity of the United Kingdom.

There has been significant focus on the question of the backstop. As I say, the backstop is something that neither side—neither the United Kingdom, nor the European Union—wishes ever to see being exercised. Indeed, as I have said, in circumstances where there needs to be a period before the future relationship is introduced, there are alternative routes that can be taken.

If the right hon. Gentleman says to me that he is concerned that we have not considered Northern Ireland throughout this process—

Nigel Dodds indicated dissent.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for saying that he has not said that, because I have remained committed to delivering on three things for Northern Ireland: no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; for us to continue to maintain and respond to our obligations under the Belfast agreement; and to ensure that we protect the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Nobody but nobody can doubt the Prime Minister’s absolute commitment and dedication to doing her duty and trying to deliver on the result of the EU referendum, but the harsh, cruel truth is that this is not the promised deal. The reason why the people of this country are so fed up is that they have been made so many promises, none of which has been delivered upon, because they cannot be delivered upon.

I agree with the Prime Minister that we face three choices: we accept this agreement, for which I respectfully suggest there is now no majority; we have no deal, which would be profoundly irresponsible and catastrophic for our country; or we have no Brexit and remain in the European Union—the best deal that we have with the European Union. On that basis, will she at least undertake today not to rule out taking this back to the British people and having a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid, on that particular issue, that I will disappoint my right hon. Friend. I am not going to change the position I have taken in this House and, indeed, more widely. I believe that it is the duty of Members of this Parliament to ensure that we deliver on the choice that was made by the British people—a choice that this Parliament overwhelmingly decided to give to them. That means that we will not be taking the option that she said of remaining in the European Union, but will indeed be leaving the European Union, and that will happen on 29 March next year.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister has once again told the House that we will be leaving the customs union, but the truth is that we will be remaining in a customs union, both in the transition and in the backstop arrangement, which can be ended only with the agreement of the EU. The truth is also that the only way to protect jobs, investment and an open border in Northern Ireland in the long term is to remain within it. Will the Prime Minister now look the British people in the eye and admit that remaining in a customs union is in our national economic interest, because without it we will be poorer as a country?

The Prime Minister: What is in our national interest is ensuring that we continue to have a good trading partnership with the European Union once we have left. That is why we have put forward a proposal, which is reflected in the outline political declaration, for a free trade area in goods. It is why we have also put forward a proposal that would ensure the frictionless trade of goods across the border. The right hon. Gentleman and I disagree. A customs union is not the only way to ensure that we continue to have a good trading relationship with the European Union. We have put forward a proposal that is reflected in the outline political declaration to achieve that, while also ensuring that we are able to take advantage of operating an independent trade policy.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): These 585 pages are a testament to broken promises, failed negotiations and abject capitulation to the EU. Does my right hon. Friend understand that they represent a list of failures—on Northern Ireland, on ECJ issues, on indefinite extension of time, on customs, on full independence of trade and of fisheries and, above all, on our truly leaving the EU, because it will control our laws? Furthermore, there have been some very serious breaches of ministerial responsibilities, the ministerial code and collective responsibility.

The Prime Minister: What we are looking at here is a withdrawal agreement that determines the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union and a declaration that identifies the scope and structure of our future relationship. Our future relationship is one that will not see the European Union controlling our laws because, in those areas where we choose to align with the European Union, it will be for this Parliament to decide that, and that decision will therefore be taken here by the United Kingdom. There will not be European
Court of Justice jurisdiction in the United Kingdom. That is what we have negotiated in the outline political declaration for our future relationship.

I recognise my hon. Friend as one of the Members of this House who has campaigned on this issue probably since the day—maybe even since before—he came into this House. He has continued to campaign on this issue with a passion, and I recognise the concerns that he has expressed. As Prime Minister and as a Government, it is our duty to ensure that we put together a deal that not only respects the vote of the British people—it does, in the ways that I have said, and it also ends free movement—but does so in a way that protects jobs. That is why I believe it is important not only that we take back control in the areas mentioned, but that we maintain a good trading relationship with the European Union, as well as having good trading relationships elsewhere. That is in our economic interest and in our national interest, and that is what we will deliver.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The political declaration includes passenger name records and the Prüm fingerprint database, but makes no reference to the crucial Schengen Information System II criminal database, which we check 500 million times a year, or to a replica European arrest warrant, and that is at a time when cross-border crime and security threats are at their highest ever level. The Prime Minister knows that these measures save lives, stop criminals and stop terrorists, so how can she of all people say, with her head and her heart, that this public safety downgrade is in the national interest?

The Prime Minister: First, of course, there is reference to us agreeing expeditious, swift and effective arrangements to enable the United Kingdom and member states to extradite suspected and convicted persons effectively and expeditiously. That will be part of the measure, and the instrument that is used will be part of further negotiations that will take place. The right hon. Lady is right to say that SIS II is important to us. There are two further areas of exchange of information that I and the Home Secretary believe are important—SIS II and the European Criminal Records Information System—and we will take those matters forward with the European Union in our further negotiations.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I greatly respect the Prime Minister’s efforts in seeking to achieve an agreement, but I do not believe that this is a good deal for Britain’s long-term future. She recognises that she has had to make unpalatable choices, and in reality, there are clearly three choices now ahead of our country, and they are crucial choices, especially for young people, who will have to live with them for the longest. The Prime Minister said that this is in the national interest, so why not allow people in our nation to have their say? If that was good enough before, why is it not good enough now?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has already raised that issue, as have Opposition Members, but this House chose to ask the people of the United Kingdom whether they wished to remain in or leave the European Union. There was an overwhelming vote in Parliament: it was about 6:1, so anybody who says that it was not overwhelming is wrong. The British people exercised their vote in numbers that we have never seen before, and the result was that we should leave the European Union. With other European issues, I have seen other countries and member states of the European Union taking matters back to their populace and holding a referendum, and when the vote has gone against what the European Union wanted, there has then effectively been a second vote—a sort of “go back and think again” vote—but I do not think it is right that we should do that in this country. We gave people the choice; we should deliver on the decision they took.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): We have been going for about an hour now and it is quite clear that not a single right hon. or hon. Member has tempted to ask Conservative Members to put their hands up if they actually support the Prime Minister on this set of proposals. [Interruption.] Not one. In that case, she says that remaining in the European Union is an option, so how can the British people fulfil that choice, if that is what they choose?

The Prime Minister: I apologise, because I did not quite hear the question, but I think the hon. Gentleman said that staying in the European Union was an option—

Mr Leslie: You said it.

The Prime Minister: No, I said that there was a risk of no Brexit at all, but the Government are determined to deliver on the vote that the British people took to leave the European Union.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend—and she is unquestionably honourable—said that we would leave the customs union; annex 2 says otherwise. My right hon. Friend said that she would maintain the integrity of the United Kingdom; a whole protocol says otherwise. My right hon. Friend said that we would be out of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice; article 174 says otherwise. As what my right hon. Friend says, and what my right hon. Friend does, no longer match, should I not write to my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady)?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend refers to the articles that relate to the protocol in the withdrawal agreement. I have been absolutely clear that some difficult choices have had to be made in relation to that protocol. Those choices have been made because I believe—I strongly and firmly believe—that it is important that we ensure there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. But as I have said before, and as my hon. Friend has heard me say before, it is not only our intention, but we will be working to ensure, that that protocol does not need to be put into place.

What we are negotiating, alongside that withdrawal agreement, is not something that will be of a temporary nature, but what will be a future relationship with the European Union that will last for decades to come. In that future relationship, we will no longer be a member...
of the customs union. We will no longer be a member of the single market. An end to free movement will have been delivered. The integrity of the United Kingdom will have been maintained. The jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the United Kingdom will end, and we will come out of the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. So I ask my hon. Friend to consider the nature of the future relationship that we will be delivering with the European Union, which does indeed deliver on the commitments I have made.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): With Northern Ireland potentially swimming in the deep end of the pool, can the Prime Minister confirm that, based on the British Government’s own logic, no economic border between Wales and England would arise should my country decide to front crawl down to them?

The Prime Minister: As we look at the proposals for the trading relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, I am conscious of the significant trade that takes place between Ireland and Wales, and the importance that that has for the Welsh ports. If we look at the future relationship, we have made a proposal for frictionless trade that would protect the business of the Welsh ports and ensure we have that as part of the good trading relationship for the future.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I put it to my right hon. Friend that the majority in the country, in Parliament and in this party accept the result of the referendum?

We back my right hon. Friend in trying to get the sovereignty she has argued for, and the prospects of prosperity, security and a fruitful partnership across the channel, the North sea and across the world.

The alternatives, if we do not go through with this, are the probability of crashing out and the possibility of a Government led by the Leader of the Opposition, neither of which is a desirable alternative.

The Prime Minister: I believe, as I think my hon. Friend does, that it is important for us to move forward in not only delivering on the vote, but ensuring that we do so in a way that protects our prosperity, and people’s jobs and livelihoods for the future. But more than that, there are significant opportunities for this country, once we leave the European Union, to develop that brighter future with those further trading relationships around the rest of the world, while keeping a good trading relationship with our closest partners in the EU.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister now recognise that she made a catastrophic error when she decided to kowtow to the fantasy extremist beliefs of the Brexiteers in her own party, instead of bringing the country together? Their views are impossible to bring about, and they are now openly plotting against her after she has tried to do her best in the negotiation. Surely she now needs to listen to the fact that there is no majority in this House for the botched deal she has brought back. She should think again and see whether, in this House, there can be a consensual way forward that leaves her Brexiteers out in the cold where they belong.

The Prime Minister: I have kowtowed to no one. The instruction I take is the instruction that was given to every Member of this House by the British people in the referendum in 2016.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It may surprise the House, but I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). Prime Minister, the whole House accepts that you have done your best, but the Labour party has made it plain today that it will vote against this deal. The SNP will vote against it. The Liberals will vote against it. The DUP will vote against it—our key ally in this place will vote against it. Over 80 Tory Back Benchers—well, it is 84 now, and it is going up by the hour—will vote against it. It is therefore mathematically impossible to get this deal through the House of Commons. The stark reality, Prime Minister, is that it was dead on arrival at St Tommy’s before you stood up, so I plead with you to accept the political reality of the situation you now face.

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that I respect the fact that he obviously holds very clear views on the issue of our membership of the European Union and the sort of relationship that we should have with the European Union thereafter. We will go forward with the final negotiations towards that European Council meeting on 25 November. When a deal is brought back, it will be for Members of this House not just to look at the details of that deal, but to consider the vote of the British people and our duty to deliver on the vote of the British people. This is the deal that has been negotiated with the European Union. We have to finalise it, and the vote will come when we have a meaningful vote. It will be for Members of this House to determine how they wish to vote at that time and to remember, when they cast their vote, the importance of ensuring that we deliver on the vote of the British people.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): There are many ironies in this whole Brexit process. One of them, as we just heard, is that colleagues on the Government Benches are going to use a parliamentary vote that 11 of the Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary in 2016, decline a request from the National Crime Agency because of serious doubts about the true source of the money he spent on the leave campaign. Did the Prime Minister, when she was Home Secretary in 2016, decline a request from the security services for Mr Banks to be investigated?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that of course we do not comment in this House on individual criminal investigations that take place.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): There are many ironies in this whole Brexit process. One of them, as we just heard, is that colleagues on the Government Benches are going to use a parliamentary vote that 11 of us voted for last December and for which we received a torrent of abuse, accusations of treachery and betrayal, and threats of deselection—but as we have heard so many times, we are where we are. I pay tribute to the fact that the Prime Minister did get agreement in Cabinet. Can she reassure us that regardless of however many ministerial resignations there are between now and that
vote, the agreement will come to Parliament and Parliament will have its say, and that she is clear that voting for that agreement is in the national interest?

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend the assurance that obviously we have the step of the European Union Council in finalising the deal, but a deal, when finalised, will indeed be brought to Parliament. As I suggested earlier, it will be for every Member of this House to determine their vote in the national interest.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has carried out her mission on this with no small sense of duty, but it has been a failure, and it has turned out to be a humiliation. This was sold to the people as taking back control, but the promises of the right-wing nationalists who drove this have been shown to have turned to dust. Instead, we are being asked to sign over control of vast swathes of our economy with no say over them while paying tens of billions for the privilege. Is it not the case that far from taking back control, this is the biggest voluntary surrender of sovereignty in living memory, and that it is time to think again?

The Prime Minister: My answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question is no. He referred to the £39 billion, which, of course, was the financial settlement that is in the withdrawal agreement, which is part of the overall package of the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship. The future relationship that we are negotiating with the European Union is designed—and the outline political declaration makes this clear—to deliver on exactly the issues that mattered to the British people when they voted for Brexit. Of course, as I have said many times in the House, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): This backstop is completely intolerable, and I feel confident that even in the unlikely event that legislation for it reaches the House, it will be ferociously opposed. Will my right hon. Friend therefore accept that this deal could well be a choice by the Government to have no deal imposed on them at the last minute, and will she therefore trigger all the implementation of no-deal contingencies now?

The Prime Minister: As I indicated in response to an earlier question, we will be continuing the no-deal preparations, because I am conscious that we have further stages in relation to this process: the European Council, and, of course, bringing this matter back to the House—and, as my hon. Friend has recognised, that is not just the meaningful vote, but the legislation that must then go through. As I said earlier, recognising that we have that European Council, and that meaningful vote to take place in the House, we will be continuing our no-deal preparations.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): While it might be tempting to watch the much vaunted Tory Brexit festival, this is deeply serious stuff. The Prime Minister knows that according to her Treasury’s own analysis, every single one of her plans means people losing their jobs. So will she look at the plan which means our losing the least number of jobs, which is the least damaging, and which may, unlike her plan, win support across the House—the plan to remain part of the customs union and the single market?

The Prime Minister: We will be leaving the customs union and leaving the single market.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Whether we voted remain or leave, whether we sit on this side of the House or the other, we know that millions of people voted for Brexit because they were anxious about the futures, about their children and about their families. Away from the Westminster bubble, we must remember to consider those vast communities when we consider the outcomes today. We know that it is no deal that would be most damaging to them.

May I ask the Prime Minister what the response has been from the business councils that she set up—those major employers in the country that will protect those jobs?

The Prime Minister: Let me first thank my right hon. Friend for focusing people’s sights on people outside the Chamber, because they are the ones we must consider when we are looking at our decisions in relation to this deal when it comes forward.

A number of quotes have come from industry about the deal. It has been said, for example, that “it delivers a clear path ahead that business so desperately needs”.

The Federation of Small Businesses has said that it “brings with it some certainty that our small businesses have craved.” Businesses out there have been looking for the certainty that a deal will bring. They have also been concerned that we focus on that free trade area and on that frictionless trade across borders, which is, of course, exactly what the Government have done.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Can the Prime Minister guarantee to the House that at the end of March we will continue to have frictionless supply chains, and that at the end of this process we will be in control of our borders, we will have brought back all the judicial powers that we have surrendered, and we will be free from the European Court’s jurisdictions?

The Prime Minister: I can say to the right hon. Gentleman that the future relationship we are negotiating with the European Union absolutely delivers on the points that he made about no jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and taking back control of our borders so that free movement is ended. We have also based the concept of the free trade area on the need for that frictionless trade in goods, to ensure that the people whose jobs depend on those supply chains do not see those jobs go, and that not only are we able to retain those jobs, but, with the other trade agreements that we are able to bring forward once we are outside the European Union, we can enhance the economy and create more jobs in this country.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on her exceptional efforts to honour the result of the referendum and to achieve a deal with the EU under the most difficult and
demanding circumstances? Will she elaborate on the scale and breadth of the future partnerships agreed on security and defence?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to do that for my right hon. Friend. There are two areas in relation to security. One, of course, is internal security on which I have answered a number of questions, and where we intend to maintain co-operation in a number of areas where we are currently working very closely with our European partners. The other is external security and defence; we will have an independent foreign policy—it will be for us to make decisions—but what we have negotiated, and is set out in the outline political declaration, is an ability for the UK, where it makes sense to do so, to work with our European partners on matters of security and defence, and on issues like the imposition of sanctions where it makes sense for those sanctions to be Europe-wide rather than simply to cover the EU, and for the UK to be part of them. We will have our independent ability to deliver on sanctions, but we will co-operate with our partners in the EU. That retains our independence but also ensures that we are able to act at all times in the best interests of the UK and of maintaining our security and defence.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister knows that her deal is dead and that no deal would be a disaster, so we risk chaos, job losses, environmental rules torn up, the NHS in crisis. That was never the will of the people; they did not vote for that. This is not a parlour game; it is about real people’s real lives, and those risks can only be addressed if we put aside party politics. So I appeal to the Prime Minister again: why will she not give the people of this country a vote—a people’s vote—on where this country goes next?

The Prime Minister: I could refer the hon. Lady to answers I have given earlier, but let me repeat my answer: this Parliament gave the people a vote, the people voted to leave, and we will deliver on the people’s vote.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With respect to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), I believe these issues are so complex that one should not deal with them on a personal basis, but will the Prime Minister help me in my loyalty by answering my question? What if the Brexit Secretary is right: what if his devastating resignation letter is correct and we are likely, or possibly, going to be locked permanently in a backstop arrangement? What if, therefore, she loses this vote in Parliament, which is very likely: can she promise me that, whatever happens in this vote, she will deliver Brexit at the end of March?

The Prime Minister: First, we will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019; that is a set date and I am determined that we will deliver on that whatever happens in between. On the backstop question, as I have said, neither side wants the backstop arrangement to be operated, but if it was, it is no more than a temporary construct. There are various aspects to this, and I will draw my hon. Friend’s attention to one or two of them. First, it is not possible on the legal basis of article 50, under which this withdrawal agreement is set, for it to set a permanent relationship for the future. That is explicitly referred to in the withdrawal agreement: it does not establish a permanent relationship. That is inherent in the operation of the article 50 legal base. I also say to my hon. Friend that one of the things we have got removed from this protocol is the idea that was there at one stage that if we had moved on to the future relationship and the British Government chose to change that future relationship, the backstop could be reinserted; it cannot be—once it is superseded, it cannot be revived.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on proving yet again that we cannot square the wheel. Can she say, hand on heart, whether she believes that what she has negotiated is better than the deal we have now?

The Prime Minister: I firmly believe that this country’s best days are ahead of us. We will get a good deal with the European Union and take advantage of our independence outside the EU with our trade deals around the rest of the world.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My own constituency, like the rest of the country, is deeply divided today. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there was always going to be a really difficult moment when the theory of a perfect Brexit met the cold reality of hard choices and compromise? Does she agree that this is absolutely not the moment to walk away from our responsibilities to govern and to provide this country with leadership at this difficult time?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do agree with my right hon. Friend. This is a complex negotiation, and it does require difficult choices to be made. The challenge for all of us in this House is to make those choices not according to what we wish the world could be like but according to the reality of the world that we see, and to make those choices pragmatically and in the interests of the British people.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Prime Minister insists that this deal is in the national interest, but specifically on the economy, the agreement will ensure that we have no say in the rules that govern how we trade, it does not include services as part of free and frictionless trade, and it offers only the illusion of future trade deals. Given all this, does the Treasury believe that we will grow faster and create more jobs under the negotiated agreement or under our current relationship with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady refers to the withdrawal agreement. What is important in terms of the relationship that will persist for decades between this country and the European Union is the future partnership that we negotiate with the EU. As we have said, the outline political declaration is based on the concept of a free trade area and on ensuring that we can continue to have that good trade relationship. I can assure her, as I have assured hon. Members across the House before, that when the meaningful vote is before this House, Members will have the appropriate analysis to inform them in coming to their decision.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It will be blindingly obvious to the entire country that the Prime Minister’s deal cannot pass this House. People will find it unforgivable that we are running out of road and that in 134 days we will be crashing out of the European Union with no deal and no transition, with catastrophic consequences for all the communities that we represent in this House. May I urge her to think again about whether at this stage we should go back to the people and present them with the options, rather than just stumbling on regardless into something that will have such profound implications for all of our lives?

The Prime Minister: The nature of Brexit and our future relationship with the European Union will be a matter that will come before this House in the vote that the House will take. Members of the House will have various issues to consider when they take that vote. I say to my hon. Friend, as I have said to other hon. and right hon. Members, that I firmly believe that, having given the choice as to whether we should leave the EU to the British people, it is right and proper, and indeed our duty as a Parliament and a Government, to deliver on that vote.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): We now know that during the transition, which may well have to be extended, we in the UK will give up our say over the rules that govern large parts of our economy, and that if the backstop comes into play, we will not unilaterally be able to leave it. How is giving up our current say and influence for no say and influence taking back control?

The Prime Minister: What the hon. Lady describes in terms of the transition period was clear. I answered questions on it in the House back in March when the European Council agreed on the concept of the transition period. That was absolutely clear. The point of the transition period is to move towards the future relationship, and the future relationship is one in which we will have the ability to determine our position. Yes, we put forward a proposal in the White Paper which had frictionless trade and a rulebook, but alongside that concept we rulebook was a parliamentary lock on determining whether or not this country would accept any changes in those rules.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Government are preparing to give £39 billion to the EU. There is no legal obligation to do so, and we are going to get nothing in return. That is £60 million for each and every constituency in this country. If I had £60 million in Wellingborough, I would have the Isham bypass, I would have our roads mended properly, I would have an urgent care centre at the Issebrook Hospital and I would have millions of pounds over. Please, Prime Minister, use that money in this country—do not give it to the EU.

The Prime Minister: The premise of my hon. Friend’s question was that there was no legal obligation for us to pay anything to the European Union. I have to say that I believe that is not the case; I believe there are legal obligations for this country in relation to the financial settlement with the European Union. As I said earlier, I believe that we are a country that abides by our legal obligations.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This deal is not in the national interest, and the Prime Minister knows that. It leaves us less secure, less influential and more isolated. However, can the Prime Minister set out what scenarios would lead to no Brexit at all? As far as I can tell, there are only two: first, she calls a general election, which I assume she will not be doing, or, secondly, she allows a people’s vote. Which of those two is it going to be?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman described what he thinks the position will be for the United Kingdom if we go ahead with this deal. He talks about our being more isolated; that will not be the case. The United Kingdom will be continuing to play its role on the world stage in a whole variety of organisations that we will be involved in, but also in the way in which we negotiate trade deals with the rest of the world and the way in which we support and co-operate with parts of the rest of the world on matters such as security and defence. There is no sense in which this United Kingdom is going to be isolated when we leave the European Union.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): For many months, this House was assured that it would have the full future framework before it when it was voting on the withdrawal agreement. I was encouraged to hear the Prime Minister say that further detail will emerge, as that will be critical for jobs and employment in my constituency. Can the Prime Minister outline when we will see that full future framework?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend because this gives me an opportunity to set out the process that will be followed. We will now be entering into further intense negotiations with the European Union, such that a full future framework can be delivered to the European Council as part of the overall package. That will then, of course, be published and available for Members of this House to see. I am conscious that it is important—while we cannot agree legal text on the future relationship, because we cannot do that until we have left the European Union—that we have sufficient detail in that future framework so that Members are able to have confidence in the future relationship with the European Union when they come to vote in the meaningful vote.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have known the Prime Minister all her parliamentary career. I do not always agree with her, but I know her to be a woman of courage. I feel sorry for her this morning—let down by the disloyalty of so many of her colleagues. I also feel sorry for her because we have given her an impossible task. We know increasingly, in this country and in this House, that there is no deal better than staying in the European Union, and it is time that we did something to recognise that, be courageous and take this back to the people.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised that the answer I give him, despite the fact that we have known each other throughout my career in this House, will be no different from that I have given to other right hon. and hon. Members in relation to taking the vote back the people. It was a decision of this
Parliament by six to one that the people should have that choice, and they exercised their vote, as I said earlier, in numbers that we have not seen before. It is only right and proper that this Parliament—this Government—delivers on that vote.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Prime Minister describe any surer way of frustrating the referendum result, and ultimately remaining in the European Union, than to accept a Hotel California Brexit deal, which ensures that we can never truly leave the EU, with all its manipulative, entangling and undemocratic practices?

The Prime Minister: We are leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. We are negotiating a future relationship with the European Union that will, indeed, deliver on the vote of the British people in the referendum by bringing an end to free movement and an end to the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union, and by coming out of the common agricultural policy and out of the common fisheries policy. These are issues to which I have previously referred, and we will be leaving on 29 March 2019.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The withdrawal agreement that the Prime Minister is presenting to us today is not in the national interest, and it is very clear that it will not make us better off. She may not be aware that an overnight YouGov poll shows that 63% of the British public are against this deal, with 64% favouring a people’s vote if the deal is rejected by this House, and it is very clear from the contributions this morning that that is what will happen. Will she now listen to the millions of people across our country and give them a say on what Brexit will actually mean, rather than on the false promises on which the vote to leave was predicated?

The Prime Minister: The documents were actually published yesterday evening: 500 pages of the withdrawal agreement, plus the outline political declaration and the joint statement. Once again, the hon. Lady’s assumption is that we should, in some sense, try to go back on the vote of the British people. I believe absolutely that we should not and that we should ensure that we do leave the European Union. That is the decision that was taken by the British people, and that is the decision we will deliver on.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): When I resigned from the Government in June, I called for the suspension of article 50 because I feared this overly parliamentary impasse. The Prime Minister is a thoroughly decent person who has public service running through her veins. With that in mind, and with an eye on the importance of the responsibility of government, will she outline the legal, legislative and political requirements for suspending article 50 or, indeed, revoking it?

The Prime Minister: As I think my hon. Friend knows, there has been a case before the courts on the issue of the extension of article 50. The Government’s position is clear: we will not extend article 50.
accepted that that is not the case and there is a bespoke agreement for the United Kingdom. They said we could not share security capabilities, but, as is clear in the outline political declaration, we do have access to certain security capabilities. They said we could not preserve the invisible border between Northern Ireland and Ireland without splitting the UK’s customs territories—that is now no longer the case. These are all issues that our negotiators have negotiated in the interests of the United Kingdom.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The boost to our economy that was referred to earlier and the necessary protection for our constituents’ jobs can occur only if UK industry has a frictionless trade area and deep regulatory co-operation. But UK financial services and UK industry also need certainty, so will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that the future political framework will contain a common rulebook and a deep customs arrangement?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend has seen, the outline political declaration makes reference to the free trade area that we will be negotiating with the European Union and, indeed, to the need to ensure that we have those good arrangements across our border. As was outlined in the joint statement that accompanied the outline political declaration, there are two areas, in particular, where further negotiation is continuing. One of them is this issue of the trade relationship. The other is, as I indicated in my response to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), aspects of the security relationship that we are continuing to negotiate. But we continue to work on the basis that my hon. Friend has set out of the importance of that frictionless trade across borders.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The right hon. Lady has been a professional colleague for more than 20 years, and I personally saw how hard she worked during the 2011 riots. This whole House recognises the dedication and hard work she has put into this 585-page agreement. However, because of her huge parliamentary experience, she will recognise that this agreement does not command a majority in this House and that in the 10 days to follow before the EU signs off this agreement she is likely to face challenges within her own party. In those circumstances, in our constitutional arrangement, when politics is broken, one can only put the question back to the British people.

The Prime Minister: I think that having had the vote in 2016, the British people will look at this Chamber, this House and this Parliament and say what people say to me when I go to talk to them on the doorsteps, which is, “Actually, we have taken the decision to leave. Just get on with it. Just deliver.”

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Prime Minister, you said that it would be our choice whether we go into an implementation period or a backstop if the agreement cannot be reached. But this document says that the protocol gives the UK a choice either to implement the backstop or to seek an extension of the implementation period, which it does by requesting that. How is that our choice and not theirs?

The Prime Minister: It is our choice on which of those we wish to do. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the extension of the implementation period needs agreement with the EU, and that is why I have described this as a choice. It is for us to say whether we wish the backstop or the implementation period to be extended, but she is absolutely right that the extension would be a matter for negotiation with the EU. If we get to that point, there would be arguments on both sides about which would be preferable for the UK, just as there would be arguments on both sides within the EU, because the backstop is not a situation the EU wants either.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I have a great deal of sympathy for the Prime Minister—she has walked the Via Dolorosa set out for her by her own party—but the false choice she is offering this place is between a deal that is dead before it has even been read by most people in this House and no deal at all. Is it not now time for the British people to take back control from this place and for her to extend article 50 and let the people decide in a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answers I have given previously to that question.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend tells the House that we will leave the EU at the end of March 2019, but we have also heard from her and hon. Members on both sides of the House that that is not the case. With due respect, under this deal we will have no unilateral way to leave and, worse still, there will be no incentive for the EU to let us go.

The Prime Minister: We will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019. After that date, we will no longer be a member of the EU. Yes, we have agreed in the transition period that we will continue to operate with the EU very much as we do today, and that is to avoid a cliff edge for business on 29 March and to ensure that business can adapt to the changes in our future relationship. I repeat that from the 29 March 2019 we will no longer be a member of the EU.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): During the course of yesterday, and excluding the Cabinet, can the Prime Minister tell the House which organisations and individuals were informed and briefed on the proposed deal, in which order they were briefed and what hierarchy was applied?

The Prime Minister: Members of the Cabinet came together yesterday to look at the withdrawal agreement and the outline political declaration. The information was made available to them once the text had been finalised. Those negotiations carried on quite late, and the Cabinet was able to take its decision on the basis of the proper papers.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why did the Prime Minister say that rejecting the deal risked no Brexit? Can she quantify that risk and say how it might occur?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend will be aware that there may be those in the House, as we have heard from several Opposition Members, who wish to...
[The Prime Minister]

ensure we do not leave the EU. I believe that it is important that we do leave the EU and that we do so on the basis of a good future relationship with the EU.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): It is obvious that the Prime Minister does not command a majority in the House. People who support leave know the deal gives power to the EU instead of bringing it back, and people who support remain know it is not as good as the one we have. We have got to this position because she has been playing games with Brexit from the beginning, including by calling a general election in the middle of the negotiation period. Will she now do the right thing, go back to the people and let them say whether the deal is good enough? It would not be a rerun of the referendum. The first was based on promises; this one would be based on facts.

**The Prime Minister:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Is there not a danger that in getting hung up on issues such as the backstop, which although immensely important is something that all sides wish to avoid, or the transition period, which is by definition temporary, we lose sight of the really important issue, which is the future relationship with the EU? That is what we should be focusing on and discussing, and that is what our constituents expect us to deliver. Is it not the case that however they voted in the referendum, the vast majority of Members of this House voted to trigger article 50, and the public expect us to deliver on our promise? Members on the Government Benches in particular should be careful what they wish for in making it harder to move to that position.

**The Prime Minister:** I support my right hon. Friend’s comments. He is absolutely right. There has of course been a lot of focus on the backstop, and I recognise why, because there are genuine concerns about its operation. As he says, others have referred to the transition or implementation period. What will actually determine our relationship with the European Union for decades ahead, though, is the future relationship that we negotiate with the European Union. That is what will determine the futures of my right hon. Friend’s constituents, of my constituents and of people right across the whole United Kingdom.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I take this opportunity to inform the House that we have now had 50 questions from Back Benchers, so may I please appeal to colleagues to put short and pointed questions, as exemplified by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne)?

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): No deal would have catastrophic consequences for UK manufacturing; this deal will not pass Parliament. Why does the Prime Minister persist in seeking to achieve the unachievable? With every day of delay, we are one step closer to the cliff. To go over that cliff without an agreement would be the ultimate betrayal of the British national interest.

**The Prime Minister:** When the deal comes to the House. Members will of course have a choice as to whether to accept it. I understand that motor manufacturers have welcomed the deal; they recognise that it is a step forward in ensuring that we can deliver on what matters for them in the future relationship and trading partnership with the EU.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Many of the questions asked by colleagues today would be addressed if there were more detail on the future relationship, but of course it has been the EU negotiators, not the British negotiators, who have refused to discuss the future relationship before the withdrawal agreement is agreed, so I thank the Prime Minister for the outline of the future relationship. Will she clarify that we will get more detail on that future relationship before the critical vote in this House?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I am very happy to confirm that for my hon. Friend. She refers to the position of the EU negotiators; in fact, I think that many feel that they have been looking more at the future relationship than they had expected. We will ensure that more detail is available for Members of this House before the meaningful vote.

**Chuka Umunna** (Streatham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that the country faces three choices: no Brexit; any agreement that she is able to finalise with the EU and get through this House; and no deal. She has also just said that we will get an economic analysis—an impact assessment. Will she undertake to ensure that that impact assessment includes a comparison of the current deal we have—no Brexit—and the one that she proposes to put to a meaningful vote in this House? To withhold that from the House would be unacceptable.

**The Prime Minister:** We will ensure, in advance of the time at which people take their decision in relation to the meaningful vote, that proper analysis is available to enable people to make a judgment between the deal that is being proposed and alternative arrangements.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Prime Minister is well known for her dancing; sadly, having seen the withdrawal agreement, it is now clear whose tune she has been dancing to. My right hon. Friend campaigned for remain and she voted for remain. Surely it is now in the national interest for her to leave, perhaps following a short transition period.

**The Prime Minister:** I note the way my hon. Friend carefully tried to weave into his question various references to matters that are perhaps not entirely relevant to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. Every Member of this House will have a decision to take when the deal is brought back. I believe it is important that we have a deal that delivers on the vote of the British people, which I believe the deal does, but in a way that protects jobs, people’s security and, of course, the integrity of our United Kingdom.
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Today is truly a sad day for our country: the Government are collapsing while we are riddled with food banks, child poverty rises and 30% of workers are in hardship jobs. What from this three-page wish list does the Prime Minister suggest will change this country’s fortunes for the better?

The Prime Minister: First, absolute poverty is in fact at a low, and we have seen in the figures that came out earlier this week that real wages have been growing faster recently than at any time in the past decade, so the hon. Lady’s portrayal of this country is not fair. She asks what will ensure and improve the future of the British people; well, first of all, getting a good trade deal with the European Union is important, and that is what we are working towards—that is what the outline political declaration sets out—and we are also ensuring that we can have good trade deals around the rest of the world. I have to point out to the hon. Lady, given the Benches on which she sits, that what is necessary for all that is the good economic management that the Conservative Government have produced.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend says in good faith negotiated the best deal on the withdrawal agreement that she could. It does not please Brussels, it does not please London, and it probably does not please any Member of this House; nevertheless, do we not owe it please London, and it probably does not please any Member of this House; nevertheless, do we not owe it to the British people to scrutinise it carefully, together with the remaining documents that my right hon. Friend has in good faith negotiated the best deal on the withdra wal agreement that works for everyone in all parts of the UK.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Today is truly a sad day for our country: the Government are collapsing while we are riddled with food banks, child poverty rises and 30% of workers are in hardship jobs. What from this three-page wish list does the Prime Minister suggest will change this country’s fortunes for the better?

The Prime Minister: First, absolute poverty is in fact at a low, and we have seen in the figures that came out earlier this week that real wages have been growing faster recently than at any time in the past decade, so the hon. Lady’s portrayal of this country is not fair. She asks what will ensure and improve the future of the British people; well, first of all, getting a good trade deal with the European Union is important, and that is what we are working towards—that is what the outline political declaration sets out—and we are also ensuring that we can have good trade deals around the rest of the world. I have to point out to the hon. Lady, given the Benches on which she sits, that what is necessary for all that is the good economic management that the Conservative Government have produced.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Given how important immigration was for some leave voters, will the Prime Minister guarantee today that her immigration White Paper will be published and debated before the meaningful vote on the deal?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I believe that it does. Crucially for fishing, we will be out of the common fisheries policy and will be able to work to enhance the fortunes of our fishing industry. Alongside this agreement, it is important to look at what the Government are doing elsewhere—for example, through our modern industrial strategy—to ensure that we are delivering an economy that works for everyone in all parts of the UK.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The Prime Minister has worked tirelessly over the past 18 months to achieve this draft agreement. My constituency voted for Brexit for many reasons. Chief among them was to reverse 40 years of economic decline. In her opinion, does this agreement provide the framework within which we can revive the economy in coastal towns such as Lowestoft, whether in trade, manufacturing or fishing?

The Prime Minister: The issue of immigration was indeed important for many people during the vote. They wanted free movement to end. What we are negotiating is an end to free movement. We will publish the immigration White Paper in due course.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has been very determined to respect the will of the people. More than 60% of my constituency in Batley and Spen voted to leave, believing that they would be taking back control, but this deal’s backstop will be policed by a third party. Today, she has said that it will not be used, it will not be necessary and it will be temporary, but in order for it not to be used, we will have to pay—who knows what?—potentially massive amounts to the EU to extend the transition period. How is making my constituents and the country poorer taking back control?

The Prime Minister: The best way of ensuring that the backstop is not used is to get the future relationship—the future partnership—with the European Union in place by 1 January 2021.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please confirm that, after 31 December 2020, other nations will not have access to
The UK economy.

The Prime Minister: We have not changed our position, which is that, as of December 2020, the UK should be an independent coastal state able to negotiate the issue of access to its waters for the following year and, obviously, for thereafter.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has been on her feet now for almost two hours. She has talked about making difficult choices. She has also said that this was not the final deal. With the pound set to have its biggest fall for two years and only seven MPs in two hours expressing any support for this deal at all, will she tell us what she expects to change to enable her to break that deadlock?

The Prime Minister: What will happen over the next few days, and before the special European Council takes place, is the final negotiation on matters relating to the future relationship. We will fill out the details and show a future relationship that will indeed be good for the UK economy.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): First, there is huge personal respect for the Prime Minister wherever Members stand on this matter.

May I urge my right hon. Friend to study evidence given to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this week by customs experts, particularly their suggestions around facilitation and technical ways of achieving a soft border that does not require a backstop? Does she agree that the independent arbitration panel is bound to find that, if the EU does not negotiate the future arrangement with that in mind, it is likely to be found to have acted in bad faith?

The Prime Minister: Indeed, and that is the point of the “best endeavours” and “good faith” references in the document.

May I just say that this is the first opportunity that I have had in this Chamber to say a heartfelt thank you to my hon. Friend for the work that he did for the commemorations of the armistice and the centenary of the first world war? He can be truly proud of all the events that took place.

My hon. Friend referenced the issue of alternative arrangements for the border in Northern Ireland. One change that has been made recently in relation to the backstop issue, which we got into the protocol in the joint statement, is precisely the ability to look at alternative arrangements rather than just at the binary choice of the future relationship coming into place or the backstop coming into place. We have, of course, got the extension of the implementation period as an option, but what is also important is that, if the future framework is not in place, it is possible to have alternative arrangements for the border that satisfy the requirement and the desire that we all have to ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): At previous times of national crisis in our history, both sides of the House have come together to resolve them. The Prime Minister has made it clear that she will not support the extension of article 50. She has said that we will be leaving the European Union regardless in March next year, and she has also ruled out a people’s vote. Is it not time that she recognised reality and, after all her prodigious efforts, stood aside for someone else who can take this country forward in a united way?

The Prime Minister: No.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): Does the Prime Minister feel that she has listened to her officials while sideling her Brexit Secretaries, and is she now disobeying the instruction of my constituents in Gravesham?

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that the answer to both of his questions is no. I have worked with my Brexit Secretaries and with officials and the negotiating team throughout this process, and the deal that we are proposing does deliver on the instruction of the British people.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As a psychologist, it is clear to me today that the Prime Minister is in denial. However pragmatically agreed this deal has been, it does not command a majority in this House. If she believes in her deal and she wants to get back control, will she put it to the people?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answers that I have given earlier on that question.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Millions of people up and down this country and hundreds of thousands of businesses want this House to get on with it. As my right hon. Friend looks to develop the future framework, I recognise that we will remain within the EU procurement rules during the course of the implementation period. The future framework protocol refers to mutual opportunities to go beyond the WTO Government procurement agreement. Will she give some indication to the House as to whether that will include taking back control of our own procurement in this country?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we are developing a framework for our own procurement arrangements.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of the fact that a no deal would be a disaster for our nation and the high probability that the House will not pass this deal, will the Prime Minister make it her first step to extend article 50 to ensure that we do not fall off a cliff edge?

The Prime Minister: No, the Government have made it clear that we will not be extending article 50.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The draft agreement states:

“Under no circumstances may the United Kingdom: apply to its customs territory a customs tariff which is lower than the Common Customs Tariff for any good or import from any third country”.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a severe limitation on our sovereignty and will limit the opportunities that Brexit offers?
The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is talking about the circumstances in which the backstop and the UK-wide customs territory would come into place. As I said earlier, that is not a situation that either side wants to see happen. Even in circumstances where the future relationship is not in place at the end of December 2020, it is not necessarily the case that the backstop would come into place. If he looks at the future relationship, he will see that there is specific reference to independent trade policy for the United Kingdom. We are working to ensure that that is precisely what we are able to have for our trade deals around the rest of the world. That was one of the questions that we looked at when we put forward our proposals for the free trade area with the European Union, and we have gone forward confident that we will be able to make free trade deals around the rest of the world.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I agree with the Prime Minister that there are no enemies of the people and no traitors in this House, whatever the national newspapers may have said last year. Every single Member will make their own judgment, according to their conscience, as to what is in the best interests of the country. None the less, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) was right earlier: there is not a majority in this House for what the Prime Minister is proposing.

This is a matter of time now—time is of the essence. Whichever way we go after this, there are hundreds of statutory instruments that have to be taken and a lot of legislation that has to be in place to prevent chaos. Does it not make sense to have a vote in this House now, before the Prime Minister goes to the European Council? If she wins, she has the support of Parliament. If she loses, we have to take another tack.

The Prime Minister: We will have a vote in this House on the final deal that is negotiated with the European Union Council. As I have said, although we have the outline political declaration at the moment, we will be filling that in with further detail, which will be available to Members when they come to that vote.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Prime Minister and I know that politics is ultimately the art of the possible. That is why I support her deal and why the City corporation and all the representatives of the financial services industry have supported it, not least because it creates, in their words, the transition that is “vital” to take forward the complex issues in our future relationship in that sector. Does she agree that anyone who seeks to thwart the deal should weigh very carefully indeed the impact not just on that key economic area, but on the rest of our economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When people come to look at their decision in relation to this deal, it will be important for individual Members of this House to weigh very carefully a number of factors, and the impact of their decision not only on our financial services sector, but on the economy more widely will be one of them.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): My constituency voted leave. I promised that we would fight for the best possible Brexit deal for my constituents—one that will protect industry. This is not it. Given that ceramics is mentioned just once in the 585-page deal, how can we trust the Prime Minister to deliver a deal that will benefit my constituents, protect jobs and return sovereignty?

The Prime Minister: The deal that we have agreed—and in particular the future relationship that we are working on filling out the detail of—is precisely one that will be good for manufacturing industry across the United Kingdom.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Taking back control of our borders was one of the big issues that influenced my constituents’ votes at the referendum. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that leaving the EU on the terms proposed will finally allow us to fully control our borders again?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am happy to give that confirmation to my hon. Friend. Free movement will end. That is one of the key elements, I believe, of the vote in the referendum that we need to ensure we deliver for the British people.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Anyone buying an insurance policy would want to know what the excess was. If the analogy for the backstop is an insurance policy, is the Prime Minister seriously suggesting that we should sign up for an insurance policy where we do not know how much the excess will cost and where we also cannot leave it without the agreement of the other party?

The Prime Minister: One of the elements of the backstop—this relates to deciding, should we be in that circumstance, whether the backstop or the extension to the implementation period would be preferable—is that there is no financial obligation.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is impossible for any of us in this House to know exactly what was in our constituents’ minds when they voted to leave or remain. It was a binary choice on the ballot paper. By that logic, it is therefore absolutely impossible for everybody to get what they want. Certain compromises are necessary in the national interest, as the Prime Minister has said. Will she therefore assure us that she will exert every effort to outline the benefits of a future trade deal that will be in the national interest and protect jobs and the economy?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give that reassurance to my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right: the nature of this negotiation is that both sides make compromises. That is what happens when two sides come together to negotiate arrangements such as this, but I am happy to assure her that we will make clear the benefits of the future trade relationship and future trade deals that we will do around the rest of the world.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The response of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation says: “we have asked the Prime Minister for assurances that the establishment of a new fisheries agreement...does not imply that EU vessels will be guaranteed continued access to our waters in return for favourable trade terms.” Can the Prime Minister give the federation that assurance? If she can, can she explain why it is not in the draft deal?
The Prime Minister: We have made it clear in the outline political declaration in relation to fishing opportunities that the United Kingdom will be an independent coastal state and that we will be ensuring that we take control of our waters. It will be the United Kingdom that will be negotiating access to United Kingdom waters.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Given that there is clearly unease about our inability to leave the backstop unilaterally, surely we have to discuss what credible circumstances could arise where we would wish to leave it and the EU would not wish us to. The only scenario I can see is where we had entered into trade talks with another country and were discussing, for example, lower standards. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is highly unlikely and would not be supported by the public? Although it is not impossible, the likelihood of our being in that circumstance is remote.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it is highly unlikely that we would be in that circumstance. He is right, first of all, that we will not be wanting to lower our standards in any decisions we take in relation to trade deals, but also that the backstop is an uncomfortable place for the European Union. It believes that the backstop has advantages for businesses in the United Kingdom, particularly those in Northern Ireland. These are advantages that it will not want to see continuing. The European Union has an interest in this being temporary, should we be in that position, just as we do.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Northern Ireland protocols make it clear that Northern Ireland will stay under EU single market law and will also be economically separated from the rest of the United Kingdom. Articles 7, 9 and 12 show that, even if the EU allows the UK to leave the single market, Northern Ireland will remain under single market arrangements, and any border down the Irish sea will be subject to the willingness of the EU to allow that to be avoided. How can the Prime Minister give us an assurance that Northern Ireland will not be constitutionally separated from the United Kingdom and economically separated from GB? Or is this not a case of Northern Ireland being put on a platter and abject surrender to the EU?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not the case. Throughout this discussion and these negotiations, the interests of Northern Ireland have been one of the key issues that we have put at the forefront of our mind, because of the particular geographical circumstances of Northern Ireland and its land border with Ireland. Northern Ireland will leave the single market with the whole of the United Kingdom. There will be specific regulatory alignment, which I recognise is uncomfortable. It will be in that portion of the single market that relates to matters that ensure that a frictionless border can take place between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, there are already some regulatory differences between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There is a question in the future which I know has raised a concern, as to whether there will be regulatory divergence between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is possible for us, and we will make unilateral commitments to Northern Ireland in relation to that issue—because we are talking about a temporary period—of no regulatory divergence. The checks and controls actually relate to the degree of regulatory divergence, so if there is no regulatory divergence, obviously, that has an impact on reducing the necessity for any checks and controls. Crucially, the EU wanted to say that it would determine whether a good that was produced in Birmingham could be sold in Belfast. We were very clear that the EU could not determine that in the future. It will be the UK Government who make those determinations.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): As I stand here, I think hard about what this means for my constituents—many who voted passionately to leave, but many others who are worried about the impact of leaving on their livelihoods. I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work that she is doing to reconcile those two positions in a workable Brexit. As a Kent MP, I have a particular interest in avoiding delays at the border at Dover and gridlock in Kent. Can she say more about the progress made in the future relationship plans for our trade in goods?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my hon. Friend for her comment and recognition that, by definition, in looking at these issues, there will be compromise. Obviously, people on both sides of the argument voted in the Brexit vote. I think the overwhelming view of the British people now is that they want to see the Government getting on and delivering Brexit for the British people.

My hon. Friend asks specifically about goods. We have expressly within the outline political declaration—we will flesh this out in the fuller future framework document—put as a key element, at the forefront of our thinking, the need to ensure we have a continuing good trading relationship, with seamless transfer of goods across borders.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I have been very clear that my constituents voted to leave the European Union, and the only way we can do that smoothly is by leaving with a deal. However, it is clear from what has been said in the House today that the Prime Minister’s deal does not have a majority. She has ruled out withdrawing article 50 and said that she will not support a second referendum, and I do not believe that a majority exists for that in this place either. But I hope that, like me, the Prime Minister realises that no deal would be a catastrophe. Will she outline her contingency plan for this deal failing and preventing a no-deal Brexit on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: The decision on the deal will come before this House in a meaningful vote, and every Member will have the opportunity to exercise their vote according to their conscience, the need to deliver for the British people, and consideration of the impact that their decision will have on their constituents’ future.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I hope that my right hon. Friend agrees that we would be extremely unwise to sacrifice the good on the altar of theological perfection. If she does agree with that principle, can she
tell me if this is a good deal for the farmers and food producers of my constituency and for the country as a whole?

The Prime Minister: It is important that in approaching the deal and the vote, hon. Members look at it in the light of the realities of the impact and the practicalities of the deal that we will put before the House. My hon. Friend asks specifically about farmers in his constituency and elsewhere. I can reassure him that I believe that this deal delivers for them in two senses. First, we will be able to come out of the common agricultural policy and develop our own policy for agriculture that meets the needs of farmers across the United Kingdom. Secondly, although people often think of manufactured goods when talking about a frictionless border, fresh produce going across borders is equally important.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The local Schaeffler plant is closing—200 jobs. Eight hundred Virgin Media job losses. Since the 2016 referendum, more jobs have been lost than have been created. It is increasingly obvious that people in my constituency and in Wales are worse off. Should not the Government respect the future wellbeing of the people by asking for a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question on the people’s vote on a number of occasions. I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I have given previously.

The employment figures we saw earlier this week show that employment in this country is now at a record high. In recent years, including since the referendum, jobs have been created in this country.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): I have a huge amount of respect for my right hon. Friend and it gives me no happiness to say this, but nothing I have heard in the past two hours suggests that this is anything other than a bad deal. When will she realise that this is not the deal that people in places such as North East Derbyshire voted for, that they want, or that they will accept?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will have an understanding of the reasons behind his constituents’ vote. I think that, if we look across his constituency and others, we see that among the key things that people wanted to achieve from leaving the European Union was an end to free movement, and we will deliver an end to free movement; and an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, and we will deliver that as well. We will no longer be sending vast amounts of money to the European Union every year. We will come out of policies that have been of concern in this country for a long time—the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy. We will ensure that we have delivered on what I believe are the key elements of the vote that people cast. While we do that, it is right that we think of people’s jobs in North East Derbyshire and elsewhere, and that is why it is important that we seek a good future trading relationship with the European Union—one that is based on a free trade area and enables manufacturing to continue to operate as it can today.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister now accept that she inadvertently misled the nation during her now infamous Lancaster House speech, in which she appeared to offer a Utopian vision of Brexit—perhaps designed to appease both wings of her divided party—that simply cannot and never could be delivered?

The Prime Minister: All the speeches I have made and the decisions the Government have taken are compatible with the Lancaster House speech. What that speech, at its core, set out was that in the new relationship with the European Union, we had to have a new balance of rights and obligations. That is exactly what we are delivering.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My constituents and I welcome my right hon. Friend’s repeated and consistent commitment that we will be leaving the CFP. Of course, being out of the EU means that we are out of the CFP in the same way that being in the EU—the policy of the Scottish National party and others—means being in the CFP. I know it does. Will my right hon. Friend also commit that unfettered access to UK waters by EU fishing vessels outwith our ability to have control as an independent coastal state will not be part of any future trade agreement with the EU?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear that we will be an independent coastal state. There have been attempts to link fisheries and access to fishing waters to the trade aspect of the negotiation. We have been very clear that we will not accept that. We will be an independent coastal state so that it is the United Kingdom that determines access to UK waters.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Uncertainty about our future trading relationships with the EU is undermining British business and having a chilling effect on our economic growth. There is absolutely nothing in this so-called deal that dispels or resolves those issues. Will the Prime Minister recognise that, instead of negotiating with the economic kamikaze tendency in her own party, she needs to reach out to this side of the House and build a consensus, or take the issue again to the public?

The Prime Minister: The decision taken yesterday gives that certainty to business, which is why business has been welcoming the deal. Richard Walker of Iceland says: “it delivers a clear path ahead that business so desperately needs”. As I mentioned earlier, the FSB says it “brings with it some certainty that our small businesses have craved.”

There are other quotes from business welcoming the fact that we have recognised the needs of manufacturing industry in putting forward our proposals for the future relationship.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for what she has said to Members on both sides of the House who have called for a politicians’ vote on a second referendum. It simply would not be appropriate
at this time. However, it must be said that “no deal is better than a bad deal” are the words that govern my position today. I cannot support the deal. Does she appreciate that she has placed many of us in a simply impossible position, where our loyalty to her and to our party is set against our loyalty to our constituents?

The Prime Minister: I fully recognise that the issue we are dealing with raises some difficult decisions for individual Members of this House. The choices before Members of this House are not easy, and I absolutely recognise that. As I said, when the final deal is brought to the House, individual Members will want to look at the details, with the interests of their constituents and of this country as a whole at the forefront of their consideration. As I say, I recognise that this is not an easy decision for people to take. I believe that what we have negotiated is in the best interests of our country overall. We will fill in more detail before the matter comes before the House, and I hope hon. Members will look at the fuller detail and consider the various issues, but that is in no way to say that the choice will be an easy one, and I fully recognise that.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I voted remain, but I represent a leave constituency. I try really hard to represent everybody in Lincoln, not just the people who shout the loudest, and I genuinely get an evenly split mailbox on this issue. I feel that this deal does not meet the aspirations and hopes of either side. It fails to protect jobs and the economy, and it creates a border down the Irish sea. If the Prime Minister will not listen to Labour Members, will she look at the faces of Members on her own side of the House, listen to their words and recognise that this is a really bad deal?

The Prime Minister: This deal does not create a border down the Irish sea. The outline political declaration on the future relationship takes the interests of people’s jobs into account by ensuring that we are negotiating a free trade area that will maintain a good trade relationship with the European Union that enables jobs to be not only maintained but created here in the UK.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Is the Prime Minister clear how committed her loyal Scottish Conservative colleagues are to fishing and the Union?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am very clear about that. Indeed, I think that my hon. Friends and our Scottish Conservative colleagues are an admirable contrast to SNP Members, who are committed to neither fishing nor the Union.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In the last few months, the Prime Minister has lost about a quarter of her Cabinet, with more resignations to follow. We have seen a dead-on-arrival deal trashed by large sections of her Back Benches, and apparently letters are winging their way to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). How many more indignities does the Prime Minister have to endure before she considers her position?

The Prime Minister: My position is that I have only one duty: to deliver for the British people in the national interest.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that Hertfordshire is fortunate enough to have major businesses in the pharma, aerospace and motor industries. Those businesses rely on just-in-time arrangements for the delivery of parts and have integrated manufacturing across Europe. Does she feel that the agreement she has put before us will be in the best interests of such businesses and all the jobs in Hertfordshire that rely on them?

The Prime Minister: I do believe that that is the case. In developing this future relationship with the European Union, one of the key issues we have been considering is the need to ensure that trade across borders and those just-in-time supply chains can continue, because many jobs in constituencies around the country depend on that. I can give my right hon. and learned Friend that assurance.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I recently visited a business in Croydon that is looking at moving to warehouses just outside Amsterdam because it thinks that this Government’s direction of travel on Brexit will not work for it. It is clear that the Prime Minister will not get a vote for this deal through the House. She has ruled out extending article 50, she has ruled out a general election, she has ruled out a people’s vote and she has ruled out no deal as well. For the sake of businesses in Croydon that are waiting right now to know what will happen, can she categorically state what she will do if she loses the vote in Parliament?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady is concerned about businesses in Croydon, she should look carefully at the future relationship that we are developing with the European Union. We will fill out further details in relation to it, but that future relationship will deliver for businesses in Croydon, will deliver on the issues that they have expressed concern about and will deliver in a way that ensures jobs can be kept in her constituency.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this deal. There is much in it that will please my constituents, who voted strongly to come out of the EU, for reasons including taking control of our borders and ending the free movement of labour. Her task of bringing the deal to the House for a meaningful vote will be much helped if she can flesh out the future relationship—what is critical. If her friends in Europe came to her aid and made it clear that they really do want a future relationship to be secured before the backstop comes into place, she would have a real chance of carrying the House.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I can reassure him that we will be filling out the detail of the future framework in negotiations in the coming days, so that when the House comes to take the meaningful vote, it will have a better understanding of the nature of the future relationship. As I say, I believe that the future relationship will deliver for industry across the country, for agriculture, for fishing and for our security.
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Does the Prime Minister accept that the fracturing of her party demonstrates that the 17.5 million people who voted leave in 2016 were not united in what Brexit means for them, and that therefore her claim of delivering on the majority vote of the British people is incorrect?

The Prime Minister: No. The majority vote of the British people was to leave the European Union, and that is what we will deliver.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I believe that those in Torbay who voted leave did so because they wanted to see a global trading Britain. That will be epitomised by us joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which has been signed by some of our oldest allies, including the one that gifted the very Dispatch Box at which my right hon. Friend stands. Can she reassure me that the deal she is proposing will facilitate British membership of that agreement?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. When we were looking at this proposal, we specifically looked at whether it would be possible to join the CPTPP. I can assure him not only that it would be possible for us to join it, but that members of the CPTPP such as Japan and Australia are keen for us to do so.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Given that it is clear from the questions to the Prime Minister today that there is not a parliamentary majority for this deal, what is her plan? Is it just to wait for the vote to be lost and then panic? The British people deserve better than that. The Prime Minister has integrity, but she does not have the confidence of the House to get this deal through, and alternatives need to be brought before us and the British people.

The Prime Minister: We will negotiate the remaining details of this deal. There will be the EU Council on 25 November, and the deal will then be brought back to the House. Information will be made available to Members. It is at that point that Members of this House will determine whether they wish to support the deal.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Which part of the financial settlement under the proposed withdrawal agreement would be payable during the implementation period and during any backstop?

The Prime Minister: The financial settlement has a trajectory in terms of payment, some of which would be beyond the periods to which my hon. Friend refers. There is no specific financial obligation in relation to the backstop, should that backstop come into play.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): If the Prime Minister is so confident of the merits of this deal, is she not slightly concerned that when she goes to Europe, other member states will look at it enviously and want to leave the European Union on similar terms? Is not the truth that the best possible relationship with the European Union, by definition, is the one that my constituents and people across Scotland voted for—to remain in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I am tempted to refer the hon. Gentleman to answers I gave earlier to that question. We had a vote. The overall vote was that we should leave the European Union, and that is what we will deliver.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On all important political decisions, I not only listen to my constituents and the businesses that employ my constituents, but ask myself, “Is this in the long-term interests of my children?” I have a great deal of respect for the Prime Minister, who is a dedicated public servant, so I ask her with all sincerity, given all the viable options available: is this deal in the best interests of my children?

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that I genuinely believe that this deal is in the national interest, and that means it is in the best interests of people up and down the United Kingdom whatever age they are, including those who are children today. What I want to do is to ensure that, as we leave the European Union, we are able to build that brighter future with a good trade relationship with the EU—our nearest neighbours—and also to develop those trade relationships around the rest of the world. That has been at the forefront of our thinking, and I believe that is in the interest of his children and others’ for their future.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This is a very divided country, and with the rise of the far right, we should be reaching out across differences, not narrowing down and looking only at our own sides. I have sought out and listened to people who voted leave, despite the fact that I represent a very remain constituency, but the Prime Minister has not extended the same courtesy to my constituents and the rest of the 48%. I have to ask the Prime Minister: what has she got against listening to people who voted remain?

The Prime Minister: My own constituency voted remain, as it happens, and we have been listening to people across the country. We have been listening to businesses; we have been listening to individuals. I believe that the deal that we have negotiated with the European Union, with the final details yet to be completed, is one that does deliver. Actually, I think that most people in this country today want the Government to deliver Brexit, to get on with it and to ensure that we do so in a way that protects jobs and livelihoods across our country.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Both the Scottish Secretary and Ruth Davidson have said that they could not possibly support, and indeed could resign over, any deal that put the integrity of the UK at risk—a reason now being cited in various ministerial resignations. I, of course, have every confidence in their personal integrity and take them at their word.
Can the Prime Minister confirm whether she has received any correspondence informing her of resignations or intentions to do so? [Interruption.]

The Prime Minister: I am sorry; I thought the hon. Gentleman was asking me, effectively, whether any members of the Cabinet or Ministers had resigned. I think he will see from public information that there have been some.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): After two years of insecurity and uncertainty, the Prime Minister is proposing an outline deal that is a real backward step...
from the position the UK is in now. Councils up and down the country, such as mine in Warrington, are urging MPs to ask for a people’s vote so they can have a say on whether to be worse off. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is in the national interest now to go back to the people of this country? If Parliament votes down this deal, will she give the British people a voice?

The Prime Minister: We gave the British people a voice—we gave them the opportunity to choose between leaving and remaining in the European Union. They chose to leave, and that is what we will deliver.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): When we become an independent coastal state again, which I very much look forward to, our fishing waters will of course need protecting. Will the Prime Minister consider commissioning a new fleet of very fast naval vessels to chase down and capture any vessels that come into our waters to fish uninvited, thus protecting fishing and our rights to fishing in Scotland and right down the east coast to East Anglia, including in the constituency of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous)?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure whether my hon. Friend’s question was intended more to be support for the fishing industry or a bid for the Ministry of Defence—[Interruption]—for the comprehensive spending review. We will be ensuring that we can operate as an independent coastal state and protect the interests of our fishing industry.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Many people think that this is a bad deal that has little support in the House and very little chance of passing. May I ask the Prime Minister to tell me what safeguards there are for UK and EU citizens in the event of a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear that in the event of a no-deal Brexit, European Union citizens who are living here in the United Kingdom will have their rights protected.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): When is the next general election?

The Prime Minister: In 2022.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This Government’s fudged, botched Brexit deal is the worst of both worlds for both leave and remain. Does the Prime Minister not agree that as we have given the Government two years to make a complete dog’s breakfast of Brexit negotiations yet still not to be in a position to command a majority in this House, it is now high time to end this charade, to waste no further time, to have a meaningful vote, and for us to take back control in this House?

The Prime Minister: There will be a meaningful vote. There will be a meaningful vote on the final deal, as it is agreed with the European Union.
The Prime Minister: Just to give the hon. Lady an example of one of the issues that she raises, if she looks at the report that the Office for Budget Responsibility produced at the time of the Budget, she will see that it said, well understanding that we were leaving the European Union, that over the next few years 800,000 more jobs would be created.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): On the protocol on Northern Ireland, paragraph 4 of a note about the agreement contains the extraordinary statement that “the parties should use their best endeavours to seek to facilitate trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.” What assurance does that give this House about the integrity of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: We have been working and are very clear, on the issues we have developed, that there will continue to be that trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. I responded a little earlier to another hon. Member in relation to the impact of any regulatory requirements that there are as a result of the UK-EU-wide customs territory. I was also clear about the changes that we have brought about—on approvals, for example, for companies to be able to sell and have business between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It was one of the commitments we gave in December, and it is a commitment that continues.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I am sure the irony has not been lost on the Prime Minister that exactly 80 years ago another Conservative Prime Minister came back from Europe waving a piece of paper and claiming success—I believe the exact words were “peace for our time”, and it was Neville Chamberlain. Given that there is no peace on the Conservative Benches and that the Prime Minister does not command the support of the House, will she tell us what the options are—a general election, a people’s vote, or a hard Brexit cliff edge?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will have heard the answer that I have given to other Members of the House. When the deal is brought back from the European Council to this House, it will be up to individual Members of the House to determine whether or not they believe it is a deal that they can support in the interests of their constituents and in the national interest.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Following this debate, the odds are that the Government will be forced into a U-turn on this other FOBT—namely the fudge over Brexit terms. Given that the meaningful vote is likely to fail, would it be prudent for the Prime Minister to ask the EU for an extension to article 50, vote is likely to fail, would it be prudent for the Prime Minister to ask the EU for an extension to article 50, and offer the public a second vote?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to answers I gave earlier to both those questions.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Prime Minister, we all understand the importance of the Belfast agreement, but these special arrangements for one part of the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland—will have an impact on the rest of the United Kingdom, including sea ports on the western seaboard, as they will create a de facto line across the Irish sea. The Prime Minister has managed one thing today, which is to unite the DUP, my party and sections of her own party on this issue, so will she go back to Brussels—this is not a final agreement—and look at it again? Let us have fairness and unity in the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to circumstances in which if the backstop were to be operated, of course the way that the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland would operate would be different from the way the border between Great Britain and the rest of the European Union would operate. That is exactly one of the issues that will be considered should we get to the point of having to determine whether the best option was the backstop or the implementation period. If it was an extension of the implementation period, the frictionless border with the rest of the EU would continue as it does today.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that this is a choice between her botched option or no deal, but it is crystal clear to everyone that there is no majority support in the House for either of those options. It is also clear that the half-hearted preparation for no deal means she knows that it is not a realistic choice. When is she going to admit that she needs to allow Parliament to come up with alternatives, and that she had better do that sooner rather than later?

The Prime Minister: We are making clear preparations for no deal. We have continued to make those preparations and we stepped them up this summer. Parliament will have an opportunity to vote on the deal in a meaningful vote.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): At the outset of this statement, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) quite rightly stressed the importance of the free movement of goods. Services are also a vital part of our economy, and something at which we are very good. Will the Prime Minister explain what benefits her approach gives to the services sector that it does not already enjoy? Importantly, what influence will it have after transition on the future development of the single market, including the digital single market?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, once we leave the European Union we will not participate in decisions that it takes in relation to its market. Services are so important to the UK economy that it is important that the flexibility set out in the outline political declaration is available to financial services and others. This is a key area for the United Kingdom, and I expect we will be able to develop good partnerships and relationships not just with the European Union, but with other parts of the world as well, in the interests of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and others across the country.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Prime Minister finally admitted last night that there are not two but three possible outcomes given where we currently stand, yet she insists that Parliament will be allowed only a binary choice between two of them, and will be denied the right to vote on the only one of those options that has any chance of commanding majority support. We will be denied the right to vote on the option that the
majority of MPs now believe to be in the best interests of their constituents. By what stretch of the imagination does that constitute a meaningful vote, and in what parallel universe can it be described as returning control to Parliament?

The Prime Minister: The meaningful vote will be an amendable motion, but as I have said, if we asked most members of the public, “If the Government brings a deal back from Brussels, what do you expect Parliament to vote on?”, I think they would expect Parliament to vote on that deal.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has to accept responsibility for the position she has put herself in. She thought it was a good idea to make the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) her Foreign Secretary, and she appointed two arch-Brexiters as Brexit Secretary. Those people were always going to lay her low and desert her, and she is now left with no majority for her position in the House. Surely she has to hold a vote in this House to give an indicative position of the House of Commons on this deal before she goes to a summit at the end of this month, so that she can honestly represent the views of the House on the deal she has negotiated.

The Prime Minister: The House will be able to vote on the final deal that is negotiated with the European Council. That is the commitment we have made to the House, and that is what will happen.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The people of Scotland voted by a wide margin to remain in the EU, and ever since that point their democratic wishes have been disregarded, as have those of the democratically elected Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, who put forward compromise positions on Brexit to the UK Government. Will the Prime Minister confirm that yesterday the disrespect to the people of Scotland was extended threefold, first by providing a differential deal to Northern Ireland; secondly by providing briefings to the Government of Gibraltar before the Scottish Government; and thirdly—as was pointed out on Radio Scotland this morning by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie)—because Conservative Members from Scotland were briefed on the text of the withdrawal agreement before the Scottish Government? Is that the case?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about respecting the position that has been taken. Throughout this process we have respected the fact that we are negotiating on behalf of, and in the interests of, the whole United Kingdom. We have continued to do that, and we will continue to do that, and Scotland of course is part of the United Kingdom.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence earlier today. I wish to ask the Prime Minister, why is there no Brexit “risk” to the United Kingdom and my constituency?

The Prime Minister: The people of this country voted to leave the European Union, and I believe that it is in their interests, and the duty of this Parliament, to deliver that. I said that there was a risk of no Brexit at all, and a number of Opposition Members have said that they would prefer to keep us in the European Union. I disagree—the British people voted to leave, and we will leave.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): My primary concern throughout this process has been jobs in my community, and nobody knows more about negotiating for jobs than our nation’s trade unions that represent millions of working people. Since this deal has been struck, has the Prime Minister spoken to our unions or their representatives, and if not, what day will she do so?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the interests of trade unions and businesses have been taken into account in the work that has been done, and there has been interaction between trade unions and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I have a very specific question and I would like a specific answer. The statement of intent for the EU settlement scheme said that those applying will not be required to show that they meet all the requirements of current free movement rules, but that has been contradicted by the latest set of immigration regulations. From my reading, this agreement is ambiguous on that point. Will the Prime Minister indicate whether, as she promised, it will be possible for people to get settled status if they can prove they have been resident and pass a criminality check, but might not be able, through no fault of their own, to prove that they have been exercising their European economic area treaty rights?

The Prime Minister: I think I heard the hon. Lady say that the regulations were ambiguous, and claimed that that ambiguity necessarily contradicted what had been said previously. In the interests of making sure that she gets as accurate a reply as possible, I will write to her on this matter.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): There are a number of simple truths among the political noise: first, Brexit is bad for Britain; secondly, the Prime Minister’s proposal has no majority in the House; and thirdly, on the future relationship, the thing that all my constituents wish to know about, regardless of their view on Brexit, is a seven-page wish list and nothing else. The Prime Minister said today that she will bring further details to the House, but can she confirm how long we will have, as a House, as Select Committees and as constituency MPs in conversation with our constituents, to fully understand the consequences of her future proposal between the UK and the EU?

The Prime Minister: We will ensure that Parliament, before it takes the meaningful vote, is able to see both the future framework as it is developed in greater detail than it is at the moment in the outline political declaration, together with, as I have indicated, the various forms of analysis that the Government have committed to.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Prime Minister’s own Scottish Tory MPs no longer have confidence in her Secretary of State for
Scotland, who has been trampled over on fisheries and the Irish backstop, and who could not even turn up today, how can she seriously suggest that this deal offers anything other than an undermining of the integrity of the United Kingdom?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman’s portrayal of the position of the Secretary of State for Scotland is completely wrong. The Secretary of State for Scotland is doing an excellent job, together with my Scottish Conservative colleagues on the Government Benches, in defending the interests of Scotland, and is doing so in a rather better way than the SNP.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Just to come back on the comment by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), to be very clear the Secretary of State for Scotland has not had a red line crossed. I hope my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will affirm again that we will negotiate fishing line crossed. I hope my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has not had a red

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Given the absence of the lesser-spotted Secretary of State for Scotland in the past 48 hours, will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to explain to those living in my already economically fragile constituency exactly why her deal puts them at a competitive disadvantage to their very close neighbours in Northern Ireland?

**The Prime Minister:** Scottish National party Members have on a number of occasions referred to the issue of Northern Ireland in relation to Scotland in this deal. Northern Ireland has a particular set of circumstances that do not—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman says, “Oh, and we do not?” No, you do not—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is really the height of discourtesy. The Prime Minister is answering the question and she must be heard. The question has been asked, the Prime Minister is answering it and the hon. Gentleman is jabbering away from a sedentary position to no obvious benefit or purpose.

**The Prime Minister:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman was suggesting that Scotland was in the same position as Northern Ireland. Of course it is not; it does not have a land border with a country that is going to be within the European Union.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This deal is far worse for our young people than the deal they currently have with our membership of the EU. This deal has no guarantees on Erasmus, funding for EU students, their travel and work rights in Europe and EU research funding worth £100 billion. When the future of millions of young people is at stake, does the Prime Minister not agree that it is time to let them vote for their future with a people’s vote, particularly for those young people who did not get a vote last time because they were not old enough?

**The Prime Minister:** There are references in what we have agreed in relation to some of the matters the hon. Lady raises, but the deal is about the future of this country. [Interruption.] She is holding up the withdrawal agreement. The withdrawal agreement is about our withdrawal from the European Union. It is not about our future relationship. The matters she referred to are about our future relationship.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister look my constituents in the eye and guarantee that this withdrawal agreement will put them in a better position than the one they currently enjoy as a member of the European Union, and promise them that not one will be a penny worse off as a result of the agreement?

**The Prime Minister:** What is going to ensure the future of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and those of Members across the House is not the withdrawal agreement but the future relationship we deliver with the European Union. That is precisely why we have made the element of the economic partnership as such an important part of that future relationship.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Prime Minister has yet to answer a simple but very important question: if her deal is rejected, what will her Government do next?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said quite a lot earlier in answer to a question, the process were that to happen is set out quite clearly for this House. The question is: how will individual Members of this House approach this decision when they come to make it in the interests of the country and in the interests of their constituents? They will need to have at the forefront of their minds the duty to deliver on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union, and the overall national interest of our country and the interests of their constituents.

**Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): The world is looking on with horror and sympathy. My constituents, people up and down Wales and across the UK worry about how to make ends meet. They know now that Brexit is bad for Britain. Can the Prime Minister tell my constituents exactly how this deal will make them better off than they are now?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Lady says she is concerned. I have set out before why I think this deal, the future partnership we can have with the European Union and trade deals around the rest of the world can benefit our economy, benefit jobs and benefit the hon. Lady’s constituents. She says her constituents worry about how to make ends meet. That is precisely why this Government continue to increase the national living wage and put through tax cuts for millions of people.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Could the Prime Minister enlighten the House as to why the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) may be meeting the Government Chief Whip at this moment?
Mr Speaker: Order. That is nothing to do with the statement.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you to the Prime Minister for staying to answer everyone’s questions. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

The Prime Minister says we risk no Brexit at all. Our NHS relies on EU workers and depends on EU research and medicines collaboration. How is this deal better for the NHS than no Brexit?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the British people voted to leave the European Union and we have a duty to deliver on that. If the hon. Gentleman is concerned about the future of the NHS, then I hope he supports the significant decision this Government have taken to make the biggest injection of funding into our NHS in its history with our multi-year funding programme, over £80 billion more going into the NHS and the 10-year plan that ensures the sustainability of our NHS into the future.

Mr Speaker: Prime Minister, thank you. Colleagues, thank you.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the hon. Gentleman’s point of order if it is material to what we have been discussing, but I do then wish to proceed to the business statement.

Neil Gray: I thank you for your flexibility, Mr Speaker.

It was suggested this morning on Radio Scotland by the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), and later apparently confirmed by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), that the Conservative Members of this House from Scotland were given advance sight of the withdrawal agreement before other party leaders in this House and before the democratically elected devolved Administrations. I know my constituents would see that as disorderly and disrespectful, but I wonder, Mr Speaker, whether you could confirm, in terms of the rules of this House, whether that was disorderly and disrespectful?

Mr Speaker: That is certainly nothing to do with the rules of the House. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman if he thinks it is, but it is not. There are judgments to be made in this matter and opinions will differ as to the wisdom of particular courses of action, but there has been no breach of order. I absolutely recognise his irritation or dissatisfaction, but that is distinct from any question of procedural impropriety.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to the point of order that was just made—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not a debate. If the hon. Gentleman is seeking a ruling from the Chair, he can raise a point of order. If he just wants to have a tit for tat with another hon. Member, it is not the proper use of a point of order—[Interruption.] He wanted a tit for tat—[Interruption.] No, he wants a ruling. Very good.

Luke Graham: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am looking for your ruling, advice and clarification on how to make sure that the record is read correctly in relation to a point that was made in the House earlier today regarding what Scottish Conservatives said about looking at Government texts before they had been released to other MPs. During the previous statement, I mentioned my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister engaging with Scottish MPs, but as I am sure Hansard will reflect, it was in relation to the statement this morning and not a preview of any other text. How can I clarify this, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Clarification—I advise the hon. Gentleman in terms that brook no contradiction or misunderstanding—is contained within the terms of his own inquiry. As he just emphasised, statements were made earlier during the course of exchanges. Because those statements were made, they will be recorded in the Official Report. Therefore, all people need to do is study the Official Report, including to establish what was and what was not said by the hon. Gentleman. I hope that that is helpful to him and that he will now go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and a spring in his step for the rest of the day. Very good.
Business of the House

1.32 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): I would like to announce that the business for next week will be:

MONDAY 19 NOVEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the Finance (No. 3) Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the Finance (No. 3) Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 21 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Fisheries Bill.

THURSDAY 22 NOVEMBER—General debate on the armed forces covenant.

FRIDAY 23 NOVEMBER—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 26 November will include:

MONDAY 26 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [Lords].

The House is rightly focused on the important decisions that lie ahead of us with regard to leaving the EU, but we also continue to fulfil the many other vital aspects of our parliamentary roles, so I was delighted, along with you, Mr Speaker, to welcome the Youth Parliament to the Chamber last week and to hear of the significant issues that its members wanted to debate, such as mental health and serious violence.

Also last week, we had the first ever Women MPs of the World Conference in this Chamber, demonstrating our commitment to global outreach and promoting our democratic values. This week is Parliament Week—a chance for hundreds of schools and civic organisations to take part in and promote democratic engagement.

Finally, along with the Prime Minister, you, Mr Speaker, and others, the Leader of the Lords and I look forward to presenting a Humble Address to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales later today on the event of his 70th birthday.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the statement. I, too, congratulate the Youth Parliament; it was absolutely wonderful to hear its members debate the issues rather than people.

I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business—again, it is a week and a day, and we do not seem to be any nearer getting the dates for the Easter recess. The staff of the House need to make plans. I know that there have been many more things to discuss and that it has been difficult to get those dates, but could she possibly look at doing so for next week?

I ask the Leader of the House to remind her colleagues about the ministerial code. The Government have again breached paragraph 9.1:

“When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament.”

It took numerous points of order and a letter from the leaders of all the Opposition parties for the Government to finally realise that they had to abide by the code and make a statement to Parliament—we are very grateful that that was done today and to the Prime Minister for staying and taking all the questions. I hope that the Leader of the House will continue to remind the Government of their duties.

It was a marathon session of the Cabinet yesterday. I wonder whether they all started with, “I hadn’t quite understood the importance of” the Dover-Calais border/the economy/jobs/security/the effect on society—delete where applicable for each of the Secretaries of State when they read the draft agreement. We have had the statement, but could the Leader of the House outline the timetable for the next stage? The Prime Minister alluded to the fact that the House will get a debate; will it be before or after Christmas? When are we likely to be able to scrutinise this very important agreement, given that the EU will be meeting on 25 November?

On Tuesday, the House resolved that the legal advice from the Law Officers would be made available. Will the Leader of the House say when it will be published? Why did it take the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), to publish a letter from the Environment Secretary saying that he was raiding 400 staff from other agencies to work on Brexit? When will we get a statement and the impact assessment on the effect of enforcing the regulations that deal with recycling, air pollution and flooding?

Returning to more contempt of Parliament and the vulnerable, private companies are making large sums of money by locking up our young. There are 2,375 people with autism and learning disabilities held in assessment and treatment units. Seven providers are charging taxpayers up to £730,000 a year for each patient. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced that he has “instigated a Care Quality Commission review into the inappropriate use of prolonged seclusion and segregation.”—[Official Report, 5 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1264.]

However, that was in a wider statement on prevention of ill health, and no notice was given to the Opposition. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) made a point of order to ask the Secretary of State to come to the House to make a statement on that review. As she said, this is scandalous. Could we have a statement on this important review, including the timeframe for reporting back? No child should be deprived of their liberty in this way. They need support, not imprisonment.

More disarray: I was going to say that the Government have lost one Minister—the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) but actually it is half the Cabinet. A week later, the Government have done what she asked; a written statement was slipped out yesterday. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and others have campaigned for this change, and the Minister will have had to give weight to relevant or irrelevant considerations, so this is not about losing money to the Exchequer, but about saving lives.

Yet another fall-out from the referendum is the number of statutory instruments—800 to 1,000. I am pleased to say that Parliament staff have worked on an SI tracker, which is now available, so I thank them for doing that. We can filter it by European Union SIs, but not by when they are going to be laid, so we have absolutely no idea of when the SIs will come to be scrutinised. We need to know that to give them effective scrutiny. Perhaps some sort of category such as “SIs on hold” or “Waiting to be laid” might be quite useful for Members.

It has been announced that a memorial to PC Keith Palmer near Carriage Gates has been agreed with his family. The Police Memorial Trust said that the memorial...
would be a reminder of PC Palmer’s sacrifice and heroism. We need our police officers in the House; they provide valuable back-up to other House staff, such as the Doorkeepers and those around the Estate. We need them, and we thank them for their work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr. McFadden) had a debate yesterday on police pensions. In the west midlands, the changes will cost about £22 million—that is what the west midlands force will have to deal with. That is putting a huge amount of pressure on police forces. The Home Secretary and the Chancellor should come up with a solution now, as the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service alluded to yesterday. Could we have statement to the House on that? It would be a fitting recognition of our police service.

Mr Speaker, yesterday you read out a great letter from our Clerk. I know that there is time until his retirement for tributes to him, but we appreciate the sentiments that he expressed in his resignation letter and thank him for his guidance and expertise in his 43 years of service. He will be missed.

Finally, I want to add my own good wishes to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales on his 70th birthday, as I did not have a chance to do so yesterday. I do not know whether Members are aware of one of the facts about him, which is that every time he plants a tree, he gives it a little shake for good luck. I wonder whether the Prime Minister did the same to her Cabinet yesterday. I shall certainly remember to do it when planting trees for the Queen’s Commonwealth canopy.

His Royal Highness is a great innovator. He highlighted organic farming many years ago, before it was fashionable, and as his mum—our Gracious Sovereign—said, he is a true Duchy Original. I wish him a belated penblwydd hapus.

Andrea Leadsom: Let me first join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the Clerk of the House. I have already made my views clear—he has done a great service to the House, and we wish him a long and happy retirement. I also pay tribute to PC Keith Palmer, who sacrificed his own life for us in this place. It is very fitting that there will be a memorial to him here.

As for the hon. Lady’s other requests, as ever, there were many. I am not quite sure that I can offer a statement on how to shake Cabinet members into submission, but it is an interesting suggestion.

The hon. Lady asked about the Easter recess dates. I can only say again that we have announced the Christmas and February recesses, and we will announce the Easter recess in due course. I remind the hon. Lady that in 2010 the Easter recess was announced on 18 March, about 12 days before it started. I think we have a way to go before we can match the appalling—[Interruption.]

Yes, we can do better. I totally agree. I fully intend to do better than that.

The hon. Lady said that we had breached the ministerial code. I entirely rebut that, and it is quite outrageous that she should suggest such a thing. The Prime Minister made herself available to the House at the first opportunity to make a statement, and she answered questions for three hours, many of them totally repetitive. The House gives her absolutely no quarter, but it does owe her some respect for that marathon statement, and it does not owe her the discovery of suggesting that it broke the ministerial code. I should like to see some evidence of that if the hon. Lady wants to press the point, because she is entirely wrong.

The hon. Lady asked about the timetable for the next stage of the process. As the Prime Minister said, the European Council meeting will be on 25 November. After that point the deal will be finalised, and it will then be brought back to the House for a lengthy review, for discussion, for debate, and for a meaningful vote.

The hon. Lady referred to what she said was another aspect of contempt of Parliament, but did not quite explain what she meant by that. As far as I am aware, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has made absolutely clear his concern about young people being locked up owing to mental health problems. As the hon. Lady said, he did discuss the issue in his statement on prevention, but if she wants to raise it with him again, I suggest that she table a parliamentary question or raise it during Health and Social Care questions on 4 December.

I am not entirely sure what to make of the hon. Lady’s point about Cabinet losses; I think that she, and indeed all Members, should celebrate the fact that the Government are addressing the scourge of gambling addiction, rather than trying to score political points.

The hon. Lady asked about statutory instruments. She will know that the Government have really sought to get a handle on SIs to ensure that the flow is even and the House has time to consider them properly. I have already made it clear—but she may wish to consult the House of Lords Select Committee that is looking into the matter—that the number of SIs will be at the lower end of 800 to 1,000, possibly even lower than that, but we are bringing them forward at a good rate. We are providing further information on the bandings and the likely range of numbers of SIs each month, to be helpful to the sifting Committees in both Houses, and we will continue to co-operate as much as we can to ensure that we get a good Brexit.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Yesterday in this place we congratulated His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales on his birthday—the greatest living Briton, Mr Speaker; you and I are on the list, but not at the apex.

One of the prince’s many achievements is to be patron of the Heritage Crafts Association. That association covers everyone and everything from wheelwrights to woodturners, from lornery to lamp making, from passementery to pargeting. A study that I initiated as a Minister in 2012 revealed that it is, collectively, worth £4.4 billion to our economy, employing 200,000 people. Should we not have a debate in the House on these heritage crafts? They, in the union of beauty and utility, add lustre to lives and wealth to our nation.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising a lovely subject. I am not quite sure what my response should be, except to say that I should certainly welcome such a debate, and also to pay tribute to the wonderful contribution that heritage craftspeople make to the beauty of our environment.
I thank the—still in place—Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. She has only done and upset my Brexit resignation bingo coupon, Mr Speaker. I had her down as a definite resigner today. However, I know that there will be further opportunities later in the day. She will probably have something to say about her place in all this. Once she has recovered from the hangover from all the unchilled Chardonnay that were trashing and traducing her deal. It will not get through the House. We are facing the option of a no-deal Brexit. We need to design a process whereby the House could consider a proper response, with all the options properly presented, so that we could make an informed choice. The Leader of the House must say today that it is not about a bad deal or no deal, the devil or the deep blue sea.

May we have a debate about buffing and puffing? The Scottish people are looking at my Scottish Conservative colleagues with a mixture of bemusement and bewilderment. First, they threaten to resign, then they do not resign, then they write letters with red lines, then they do nothing, then they write more letters—only to be ignored, which then seems to satisfy them. They are about the most useless rebels in the history of parliamentary rebellions. Everyone in Scotland is watching the wonderful “Outlaw King” on Netflix, the story of the great king Robert the Bruce. We can only imagine what the Bruce would do if he had to rely on these “rebels”—they would still be sending letters to Edward I as the heavy horse came charging over their heads.

Lastly, given the scale of the resignations that we have seen today—I think that a quarter of the Cabinet have resigned in the past few months—perhaps the Leader of the House would consider providing a spot in the parliamentary weekly calendar that would allow “resignees”, if we can call them that, to come forward in the comfort of this place, rather than having to stand outside on that draughty green to give their views to the press. I think that that is worth considering.

I am really sorry to hear about the break-ins at Willesden and Kenton temples. That is appalling. I encourage my hon. Friend to take the opportunity to speak to the Home Secretary about that himself. I am sure he will do that. I am very aware that we need to provide Back-Bench time. I am working on it and would be happy to meet him and the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee to discuss their priorities.

This is my question. Last week, we celebrated the Hindu new year and for most of us it was a joyous occasion. The following day, very sadly, the Willesden temple was broken into and the idols, or statues, that all Hindus celebrate were stolen. Subsequently, earlier this week, the Kenton temple was also broken into and the same thing happened. May we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the subject, so that greater security could be provided for Hindu temples across the country to prevent this from happening anywhere else?

As I said in my introductory remarks, I was also delighted to hear the extent of the impassioned debate in the Youth Parliament and MYPs are right to raise that very serious issue, as is the hon. Lady. I am aware that she raised it directly with Home Office Ministers earlier this week and I have written to them on her behalf. So she has very well raised this issue, as she should, and I hope to come back to her on it soon.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. He will be aware that the Government introduced a range of business rate reforms worth over £13 billion in England over the next five years, and that we want to encourage the use of empty town centre properties by some of those occupiers who can contribute to the vitality of town centres. We launched our “open doors” project this month, which matches community groups...
looking for spaces with empty commercial properties and I encourage him to speak directly to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers to see what more can be done to protect them from unnecessary costs.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): After two years, the Prime Minister has said the Government will act to stop rogue bosses swiping tips intended for staff. In answer to my written parliamentary question, the Government, however, have said that this requires primary legislation. When will the Leader of the House make time available for this important Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She is absolutely right; this does require primary legislation. We will be looking carefully at how we can bring that forward as soon as possible. In the meantime we have Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday 20 November and I was very pleased to see them contributing in this Chamber.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am glad my right hon. Friend told us about the women MPs of the world debate and I was very pleased to see what more can be done to protect them from unnecessary costs.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a number of important points. On deportations, I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so he can raise his EDM issues directly with Ministers. On FOBTs, he raises a very good point that many hon. and right hon. Members will have a lot of sympathy with.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): In my constituency, tributes are gradually being withdrawn from the site where two young brothers were killed earlier this year by a speeding motorist who was high on drugs and received a paltry sentence for the crime. Last October, the Government announced they planned to increase the maximum penalty for death by dangerous driving. A year on, we are still waiting. May we therefore have a debate or statement on when the Government will introduce the Bill to increase the sentences given to those found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very serious issue and it is completely horrendous when anyone is killed as a result of dangerous driving. She will be aware that we had a debate, as a result of many representations from hon. Members, just before recess. I hope that she was able to make her points there, but certainly Ministers are looking very carefully at what more can be done.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Procedure Committee, on which I sit, is going to report imminently on the meaningful vote. It would obviously be wrong for me to provide a trailer for that, but I can give my personal views, and I wonder what the Leader of the House thinks about this. If we are going to have a meaningful vote, should we not know what we are voting on? Is it not the right thing to do, in accordance with the normal procedure of the House, to have the amendments first? Some of us are Brexiteers and some are remainers, but we all believe in the supremacy and importance of Parliament. This motion is amendable and it makes no sense at all to vote on the main motion having no idea what subsequent amendments might be passed. So can the Leader of the House consider at least that as a representation—we should take the amendments first?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that there will be, as the Prime Minister said earlier, plenty of time for discussion and consideration of exactly what the deal looks like and of the advice given around it, and indeed for consideration of amendments that hon. Members want to bring forward. Clearly, once the deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have the choice to accept or reject the deal. Of course if Parliament accepts the deal, we will introduce the EU withdrawal agreement Bill, which will implement it in domestic legislation, and if Parliament chooses to reject the deal, the Government will be unable to ratify the agreement. But to be clear, of course the motion will be amendable.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On Saturday, my daughter Jessica, will be two months old and Saturday is also World Prematurity Day. My daughter was born very premature. At the moment, under UK law, fathers have to take their paternity leave within 56 days, but that is very difficult to do when their child is in a
neonatal intensive care unit. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate so we can look at this issue and change the law for good?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I say that Jessica is gorgeous? We all saw the tweets that the hon. Gentleman put out and congratulate him again; we are so pleased she is making good progress—that is great to hear. He raises an important point and I encourage him to raise it directly with Health Ministers on 27 November. I am sure they will be keen to support him.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on the way in which private landlords treat some charities? Families United Network is the most amazing charity, serving a lot of my constituents, and it is facing having its rent doubled, which will probably put it out of its premises. This charity provides respite care that is desperately needed by families with disabled children. I visited the charity and it does amazing work. It concerns me that a company such as Petchey Holdings can just threaten to double the rent, effectively meaning the charity has to close down.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about that and hope that my hon. Friend raising it in the Chamber will cause the landlord to think again. He is right to raise the problem of landlords unreasonably raising rents and the Government are looking at what more can be done to prevent that from happening.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Last Friday, we marked the two-year anniversary of the worst rail disaster for decades: the Croydon tram crash, which took the lives of seven people and injured many more. The Rail Accident Investigation Branch report was published last year, and its first recommendation was to set up a UK tram safety board to ensure that nothing like this could happen again. The Government have withheld funding for the board, so it has not yet been set up, and that withholding of funds leaves all those across the country who travel on trams potentially less safe than they should be. Last year, when the investigation report was published, I asked for a debate and for a Minister to come to this place, but no Minister has been to the House to talk about this at all. May I ask that a Minister comes to this place to make a statement about the Croydon tram crash and how we can ensure that nothing like it happens again?

Andrea Leadsom: We all recall that appalling day and that terrible crash. It was horrendous, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the matter here. We will have Transport questions next Thursday 22 November, and I encourage her to ask her question then.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Yesterday it was announced that the House of Fraser store in the Metro Centre was to close, apparently following a breakdown in rental negotiations. Will the Leader of the House join me in offering the staff commiserations on the loss of their jobs? Will she also arrange a debate in Government time to discuss the retail sector and the impact that these rent discussions are having on shops?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. We know that the retail sector is under great strain at the moment, not least because people are changing the way in which they shop and doing much more shopping online. I certainly agree that we should all send our best wishes to those who are losing their jobs, and of course Jobcentre Plus will stand ready to support them in finding other work. The House has had a number of debates on what more can be done in the retail sector, and I encourage the hon. Lady to take part in next week’s Finance Bill Committee debates so that she can raise this issue again.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be aware that there are 115 pieces of proposed legislation to be debated on 23 November, including the beautifully written Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wonder who that was written by.

Chris Stephens: Funnily enough, it was the Member for Glasgow South West. Can the Leader of the House indicate whether more time will be allocated for the House to debate private Members’ Bills in the future?

Andrea Leadsom: I tabled a motion on Monday to provide the House with an additional three sitting Fridays, but unfortunately it was objected to. All hon. Members will know that the Government are keen to support some of the excellent private Members’ Bills, and that is why that time has been provided. I will put forward the motion again shortly, as I am keen for the House to have those extra days.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The only Crown post office in the centre of Cardiff, Wales’s capital city, is to be franchised to WH Smith, a failing retailer, together with 73 other post offices across the country. May we please have a debate on stopping this unnecessary and damaging privatisation, which is going to affect the jobs of 800 people?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this point again—it has been raised a number of times at business questions. As I have explained to other hon. Members, the Post Office is moving some of its centres into WH Smith. That is designed not to reduce the services in any way, but to rationalise them. Indeed, in taking on banking and other services, the post office network around the country is often enabling people to get a better service than previously.

Chris Bryant: I am delighted that the Leader of the House is staying in her job because I will admit—as long as she does not tell anybody else—that I quite like her. [Interruption.] Blowing kisses is not going to get her anywhere, however.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Well, we know that.

Chris Bryant: Easy!

As the Leader of the House will know, the House passed a Magnitsky-style measure in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. The Government have provided three excuses for not doing anything about this yet. One is that it cannot be done until the end of Brexit, and the Foreign Secretary says that that
means after the transition period is over. Another reason
is that we would have to table statutory instruments and
that there is no time for SIs. However, everyone in this
House would love to get this done as quickly as possible.
Other countries in Europe have already done it, so will
she please stay in her job just to get this thing done?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the hon.
Gentleman; I also enjoy our little altercations across the
Floor of the House on so many different subjects. I hear
what he is saying, and I would be happy to raise this
with Ministers directly on his behalf.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): May we
have a debate on who should be on the front of the new
£50 note, and will the Leader of the House back the
campaign supported by the Stoke-on-Trent Sentinel to
have the brilliant engineer who designed the Spitfire,
Reginald Mitchell, as the winner?

Andrea Leadsom: That is a very leading question
from the hon. Lady. I absolutely applaud her for suggesting
that we should have some sort of debate on this. I could
probably come up with my own proposals as well. She
makes a good suggestion, and I encourage her to seek a
Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can
have their say.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday, I met a
delegation from Burma consisting of Christians and
Buddhists. In September 2018, a United Nations fact-
finding mission published a report cataloguing the human
rights violations committed by the Burmese military.
The report accuses military generals of genocide against
the Rohingya, and also outlines crimes such as murder
and arbitrary imprisonment. In the past few months,
for example, 90 pastors were detained in the Kachin
province alone, and 50 churches were attacked and
destroyed. Other crimes outlined in the report include
enforced disappearance, torture, rape and the enslavement
of other religious and ethnic minorities in the Christian
Kachin and Buddhist Shan states. Will the Leader of
the House agree to a statement or a debate on this
matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an
important issue that is quite harrowing for all
Members across the House. I am aware that a number
of right hon. and hon. Members have visited Burma to
see for themselves what has been going on there. It is
certainly ethnic cleansing, and there seems to be an
overwhelming level of evidence for some of the atrocities
that he has highlighted. He will be aware that my right
hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Burma in
September to press its leaders to take action, and also
convened a meeting in New York later in September to
try to galvanise the international response. From a
humanitarian and a diplomatic point of view, the UK
Government are trying their hardest to get these issues
resolved.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Each
Lent, Nottingham women seeking a termination of
pregnancy must run an unacceptable gauntlet of protesters
outside the Nottingham treatment centre. We need a
buffer zone, but this has been ruled out by the Home
Secretary. May we have a debate in Government time
on the harm that this will cause?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to what the
hon. Gentleman says. He will be aware that there is a
balance of issues on all sides of this debate, and it has
been concluded that it is reasonable to have quiet and
peaceful objections shown. I think that many hon.
Members will have differing views on this, and I encourage
him to perhaps seek an Adjournment debate on the
subject.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and
Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have an urgent statement—as
soon as someone is appointed as Secretary of State—on
the mistreatment of young people with epilepsy by the
Department for Work and Pensions? My constituent
suffered an intermittent epileptic seizure, which is an
unpredictable part of his condition, and could not
attend his assessment, but he has now had his personal
independence payment stopped. This is surely a callous
system that needs to be turned around. Could the
situation be looked at, particularly in relation to young
people with epilepsy, who are being disadvantaged?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises what sounds
like a terrible constituency issue—she is absolutely right
to raise it. She will be aware that we have Work and
Pensions questions on Monday 19 November, and I
encourage her to raise this matter with Ministers then.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):
The outgoing Clerk of the House is a great champion of
the London living wage, which is paid here in Parliament.
May we have a debate in Government time on the
excellent scheme here in Parliament, given that some of
our publicity is not so excellent? That might also encourage
other employers to pay the London living wage, when
they can, to entry-level employees.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for
raising that issue. She is right to suggest that we are not
all bad, and that the paying of the London living wage
is a significant positive for this place. There are many
more areas in which Parliament leads the way or aspires
to do so, and I share her enthusiasm for having a debate
on that subject. She might like to raise the matter
directly with Ministers at Question Time, or perhaps
seek a Westminster Hall debate so that other colleagues
can share their views on the importance of paying the
London living wage.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): My
constituent’s husband died 11 days before she became
eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain. I wrote to
the Home Secretary on 20 July to ask for a meeting with
him about that case, but I have still not had that
meeting. I wrote to him about another constituent,
Mr Moneke, on 5 June, 20 July and again on 9 November
to ask for a meeting to discuss that case. Could the
Leader of the House please nudge the Home Secretary
and ask him to meet me about those two cases?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to
raise important constituency matters here, and I will be
happy to write to the Home Secretary on her behalf.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Since my election, it has been a joy and an inspiration to get to know the Alive and Kicking project, which plays a vital role in the service of elderly and disabled people in my constituency, in the north-east of Glasgow. Indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker, it was opened by one of your predecessors, Michael Martin, on 15 December 1988, which was a month and a day before I was born. For the last 30 years it has been led by Anne Marie Robertson and Eulalia Stewart. It has been recognised at a national level, including with a Queen’s award for voluntary service in 2008. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking and congratulating Alive and Kicking on its excellent work as it celebrates its pearl anniversary, and will she consider granting a debate on the excellent work that voluntary organisations such as Alive and Kicking do to prevent social exclusion and to involve our elderly people in the later stages of their lives?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman raises this wonderful charity, Alive and Kicking, which has obviously been alive and kicking since before he was, although he is very much alive and kicking these days, to extend that analogy. I absolutely share his enthusiasm for all the fantastic charities that do so much, particularly for people who might be vulnerable, elderly or with disabilities. I am absolutely happy to join him in praising them. He might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can talk more about what they are doing for his community.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Gareth Snell.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker—what a surprise to be called. [Interruption.] It is lovely to have friends, isn’t it?

In her answers to other questions, not least that from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the Leader of the House rightly outlined what may happen should this House decide not to endorse the deal that has been brought forward. She rightly says that if the House rejects that deal, the Government cannot bring forward the European Union withdrawal implementation Bill. However, under section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Government would have to bring forward a statement within 21 days to outline their intentions. Could I encourage the Leader of the House to take back to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet the point that, while it may be their prerogative to take 21 days, bringing that statement forward as soon as possible would be in the national interest and would allow the businesses in our constituencies to do some planning, without waiting until potentially the new year?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly note what the hon. Gentleman says. He will appreciate that the instructions of the House are the instructions that were given in this place through the withdrawal Bill. However, the Government are clearly trying to be as collegiate as possible across the House to try to get the best possible deal for the UK as we leave the EU. I will certainly make sure that his thoughts are passed on.
Veterans Strategy


2.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Veterans Strategy.

Before embarking on this important subject, which I am very pleased to get to, perhaps I can just reflect on the debate we have just had on Brexit and our relationship with the European Union. Whatever happens, and whatever our relationship with the European Union, Britain must and will continue to play a pivotal role on the international stage, especially when we are seeing threats diversify and become more complex, added to the fact that we are testing the limits of our planet. Very few nations have the ability and desire to step forward to help shape the world around them. Whatever ID card we end up having in our back pockets, we must remain a nation with tier 1 capabilities—with that full-spectrum defence posture—and able to protect our people, defend our interests and, of course, promote prosperity. I hope we will gain the full support of the House as we make the case in the forthcoming spending review for a strong defence capability.

It is appropriate to reflect on this weekend’s events, which are very much in our minds. The nation paused to give thanks to a previous generation, which stepped forward to defend our values, our shores and our way of life. The numbers are difficult to contemplate in today’s context. Lord Kitchener’s call, “Your country needs you”, went out to an entire generation. Six million Britons were mobilised. I had the opportunity to visit the Bournemouth grammar school in my constituency on Friday, before the anniversary of the armistice. I had the pleasure of attending the Invictus games in Sydney, which is such an illustration of how those who are injured, whether mentally or physically, find a new chapter. They are unconquered. They are moving forward with their lives successfully.

Also prior to the anniversary of the armistice, I had the honour of visiting the cemetery at Tyne Cot—the hill that was fought over in the third battle of Ypres. Those who have visited this incredible cemetery will know that there are 12,000 war graves there, two thirds of which do not have names on. Around the walls are 34,000 more names of those who were never found—the soldiers there is no gravestone for. That shows the scale of what happened a century ago, when an entire nation was mobilised.

War then was not glorious, as we thought it might be. It provided new tactics and a different approach to our armed forces, which we see in many ways today. There was also a focus on something that we absolutely recognise today: post-combat care. Many of the household names that we are familiar with—Combat Stress, Blesma, SSAFA, the Royal British Legion and even the poppy appeal—all stem from the first world war. SSAFA actually goes back further than that, to the Egyptian campaign.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister is raising a very important issue, but I think that it has sometimes led us astray in our diagnosis. A lot of work done recently suggests that people who have been diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder have actually suffered a blow to the head. We would do far better to treat them for that and to provide neuro-rehabilitation than to treat them for post-traumatic stress disorder. Does the Minister recognise that?

Mr Ellwood: I do recognise that. If I may, I will come on to that. I am simply making the point that this was the first time there was a recognition of shell shock—post-traumatic stress disorder. These were names that did not really apply then. There was not a full understanding of what was going on with our troops, but there was a recognition by the nation that we had to look after our returning troops in one form or another. There was a duty of care, which is what we are focusing on today.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): What the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is referring to is often described in the United States as mild traumatic brain injury, or MTBI. We have done a lot of research in this country, but if we are honest, the Americans are a bit ahead of us on this. As the Minister will know, it is often very difficult to diagnose accurately what is PTSD and what is MTBI. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue in the Chamber, and I say to the Minister that we probably need more research in this area to devise the best possible balance of treatment.

Mr Ellwood: I am building up to that but, to respond directly, it is important to share an understanding of what we are doing. I had the pleasure of attending the Invictus games in Sydney, which is such an illustration of how those who are injured, whether mentally or physically, find a new chapter. They are unconfquered. They are moving forward with their lives successfully.

At the same time, in the margins of those events, we brought together all the Veterans Ministers of the “Five Eyes” community to share knowledge. The American team presented studies on suicide prevention, on blast injury and on mental health. It is interesting to see how we can compare notes, pick up ideas and share best practice, which is so important. Indeed, I was pleased to sign a memorandum of understanding to make sure that we share our knowledge and provide the best possible support for our veterans.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We should put on the record in Hansard our thanks to Prince Harry for ensuring that the Invictus games have become a reality. As happens all too often, the recognition of his initiative has perhaps been lost, and it would be good for the House to reflect that the Invictus games started through his efforts, his energy and his interest.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The whole House, indeed the nation, is indebted to the efforts of Prince Harry, who once again was able to come to the games, which are his creation. The Invictus Games Foundation has now got into a steady drumbeat of bringing together people from across the world every second year, and I am pleased to say that we will now hold a domestic event in the interim years, which again
is all about bringing together and supporting those, whether they are in the armed forces or are veterans, who need to be given support to move forward. This has been hugely successful.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On Monday I had the privilege of launching the “Walking Home for Christmas” campaign with Invictus games medallists. The campaign, with Help for Heroes and Walking with the Wounded, is targeted at veterans whom we struggle to support over the Christmas period, when they are at their most vulnerable. Does the Minister agree that it is at this point that we need to honour the covenant and make sure that we not only respect those who served during world war one and world war two but now remember those who served more recently?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. The Ministry of Defence works with Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion on making the Invictus games a reality and in pushing forward Prince Harry’s vision.

The hon. Lady is also right to illustrate the changing requirements of our veterans. The profile will change. Over the next 10 years, the numbers will move from 2.5 million to 1.5 million, and many of the latter will be veterans from the Afghan and Iraq campaigns. Indeed, they do not even call themselves veterans, which is interesting—they see themselves as ex-forces, leaving the veteran label to national service and second world war personnel. Either way, she is right that that support should be there.

None of this was in place when I departed the regular forces. I do not mean to say that we have got it right—it is a moving force that morphs as we develop—but I am pleased that we have the building blocks to advance our support for veterans. The 10-year strategy is based on the covenant, which the hon. Lady mentioned. The covenant is often raised in Parliament, and it is the nation’s commitment to making sure that anybody who has served is not hindered by their service or held back because of what they have done. That message needs to go out to every single Department, not just those in and around the MOD. It can be tricky for a Department that perhaps is not military facing to be aware of its responsibilities to veterans and armed forces personnel.

Our second pillar of support is the veterans board, chaired by the Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister, which brings together the Secretaries of State of the various Departments so that local government is held to account. I encourage every Member of Parliament to visit their local authority and ask, “Who is your veterans champion? Who is the person who will help to challenge or deal with matters of homelessness and housing?” The veterans champion will be the focal point in their area.

Ruth Smeeth: I met a veteran earlier this week who went to his local authority to say that he was homeless and needed support. He had been out of service for four months, and he was told that there were others in the queue who were more relevant, including refugees who had just arrived. He ended up homeless and was supported by Help for Heroes. Does that not suggest that local government is still not fulfilling its obligations under the covenant?

Mr Ellwood: I do not know to which local authority the hon. Lady is referring. If she would like to write to me with the details, I would be more than happy to look into the matter. She is absolutely right. Like many other aspects of national government, we are seeing different standards across the country, and often it is to do with the historical relationship that a local authority has had with the military.

We would expect Portsmouth to get this right, because of the longevity of its relationship with the military, alike Staffordshire, with the arboretum. In Bournemouth, in my own constituency, this is not something that comes naturally, because Bournemouth is a very new town with no relationship with the armed forces, but that should not prevent it from being aware of its duties in honouring the armed forces covenant.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister rightly mentions Staffordshire. In North Staffordshire we have the tri-services and veterans support centre, which provides in-community pastoral support and experienced services for ex-service personnel who live across Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire. The centre is currently in a building owned by Staffordshire County Council. Does he agree it is important that such services are protected and safeguarded, and that it is the duty of local authorities to make sure that such services continue for the long term? Without them, problems will arise in the acute sector, which is not good for anyone.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes his point clearly. We want every local authority to recognise what its duties are to help our brave veterans. The more we can do that via the veterans board, the better it will be. In these discussions we are illustrating the variety of support that veterans receive, whether it be from charities, local authorities or, indeed, Government Departments—

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Ellwood: I was about to finish my sentence, but of course I will give way.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I apologise. It should be the mindset, the modus operandi, of any local authority. It should be very clear who the armed forces champion is—it should be on the local authority website so that people know who to go to.

Many types of support are available for veterans. A veteran may be in a very dark place when they seek support, and the last thing we need is a confusing picture.
as to where that support can be found. Charities have been mentioned, as have local authorities and national government. Each plays a role, and we have established the veterans gateway to provide a single portal where any individual can make a phone call or go online to seek the necessary help to guide them to where they need to go.

Again, this is in its infancy. We have 400 service-facing charities, not all of which are signed up to the gateway. We want them all to sign up. The big ones have signed up, but they are also running their own call centres. Either way, we need this to work. We need this to be the vehicle, the single portal, for any veteran who requires help. When I refer to help, it is not necessarily physical support—it might be help in looking for more employment or in setting up their own initiative—but this is where they need to go.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is poised.

Chris Bryant: I wasn’t, actually, but the Minister has enticed me. I agree with everything he has said, and my local council is determined to do everything it can, because we send a lot of young men and women from the Rhondda into the armed forces. However, I just wonder whether there is something the Government need to do as a prior step, which is to check for brain injury the moment somebody joins up. There is strong evidence now to suggest that kids from poorer backgrounds are four times more likely to have a significant brain injury either in their teenage years or before the age of five. Once they have had one brain injury, they will have another. If we could screen everybody coming into the armed forces, we might be able to provide a better standard of living.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point. First, let me say that screening does take place; medicals are done to make sure that people are fit for service. He touches on a science that is still evolving, and which I have only just started to learn about. Someone who is subject to a blast injury might stand up and walk away from it, but be unaware that their DNA has been shunted in some way that could have long-term impacts. We are still coming to terms with recognising that, and we need to advance our understanding of it. The Royal Foundation, which is supported by Prince Harry and Prince William, is providing funding for us to look into this and get a better understanding of what is happening. That goes along with our studies with the Confederation of Service Charities, is doing a far better job of bringing together like-minded charities to work together. They are now working on cluster lines, so the employment cluster is bringing the relevant charities together and the same is happening for housing and mental health. They are doing far better work in co-ordinating their activities, as has been touched on.

Another strand or building block, which we have sort of skirted over so far, is our entire mental health strategy. I look back at my own time serving, when even a mention of any form of mental injury was a no-no; people did not raise it whatsoever, not just in the armed forces but in society. We are now seeing a far more open-minded approach to this issue, whereby people are putting their hand up and saying, “Yes, I have had a problem with this.” If people do that at an early stage, help can be brought in and it can prevent problems from incubating.

Our new approach is encouraging parity between physical and mental injury, so that we promote better practice and tackle the stigma attached to mental health, which helps prevention in the first place. We are also getting better at detection. Whether someone is a platoon commander or a ship commander, they are encouraging people to step forward and look out for mental ill health, and then the individual involved or a friend of theirs may put their hand up. We are saying, “Put your hand up, get yourself checked out. It is okay to do so. It is okay to say you are not okay. Get it treated. Get it sorted. Get yourself back on the frontline, without fear that you are going to be affected in your promotion or long-term prospects in the armed forces.”

Mr Francois: As the Minister may know, although some in the House may not, the Royal Marines developed trauma risk management—TRIM—which has been so successful that it is now taught across the whole of the armed forces. The essential thing about it is that someone’s mates absolve them, saying, “Look, Bill, we can see you’re struggling, mate. It could happen to any of us. It’s happening to you. Let’s not pretend. Let’s go and see the medical officer and get some help.” Will the Minister confirm to the House that that has been an extremely successful policy, meaning it is now easier for people to be honest about what they are going through?

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend makes such a valid point, and it is not just Bill, but Belinda and everybody else. It applies not only to those in uniform but to the armed forces fraternity as a whole—it is the families as well. They may be the first people to pick up on the fact that something is not quite right. In my time, people held back and kept this to themselves, but it would incubate and then they would leave the thing they loved. It then became an issue for a veterans charity or the NHS, because people had not dealt with it from the earliest point. My right hon. Friend rightly points out that TRIM was developed in the Marines, who got it from the United States, and it is now being rolled out as better practice right across the armed forces.
The veterans strategy is about bringing all those things together. It is about looking forward and having a 10-year vision of a cross-government approach. I am pleased to say that it has the support of all the devolved Administrations. It is so important that we can let veterans and their families have a full understanding of what to expect from the armed forces and other agencies for the rest of their lives. The strategy is also about promoting and celebrating what our armed forces do; we need to tell people about their success stories. We have not been particularly good at that. We also need to promote the fact of what those in our armed forces actually do.

I was struck by a phone call I had with my mother, in which we talked about her father—my grandfather. I remember sitting on his knee and him talking about the battle of Passchendaele. I could not even say the word, as I was only four or five at the time, but I remember it because he showed me his medals. I had a personal connection with somebody who fought in the first world war. My two little boys do not have that connection, as there is now a distance. The cohort of people who are directly connected to armed forces personnel today has shrunk considerably from what it was at the time of the first world war, when an entire generation—every village, town and city—was affected. Everyone knew somebody who had been injured or killed, and they knew people who had survived. We need to make sure that there is not a skewed view of what it is like to be in our armed forces.

I make it clear that someone who serves in our armed forces will come out a stronger, better person, but obviously some people require help. Some of the things we see on TV, with “Bodyguard” being the latest example, give the impression that if people serve, they may be mentally affected. What does that do to the reputation of the armed forces? What does it do to a potential recruit if they get the idea that they might be mentally affected if they join the armed forces? It hinders them in signing up. What does it do to an employer that does not have exposure to or knowledge of what it is like being in the armed forces? It gives them a bias against signing up someone who has military experience. Veterans themselves might also hold a stigma about this because they have served. We need to change that. We need to be very proud of these people—particularly in Britain, because of the professionalism of our armed forces.

That brings me back to promoting and celebrating what our armed forces actually do, and we are going to push that forward through a consultation paper. The veterans strategy has now been published—it was issued yesterday, and there will now be a consultation lasting 12 weeks, in all corners of the country, to address how we implement it. It will deal with how we put this work into practice, which will be slightly different in different places. We are all aware of the challenges in Northern Ireland, where a very different approach needs to be taken from that in other parts of the country. I look forward to getting feedback from individual Members, as well as from charities, councils, academics, service providers and veterans communities themselves, on how we can make this work.

Extra funding has come through from the Budget; we have an extra £2 billion for the NHS mental health budget and £100 million for the rough sleeping strategy—that must obviously include the veterans aspect of the issue, which we have touched on. There is a further £10 million in the covenant fund trust, from which individual charities and organisations can bid for further funding to promote their own schemes and so forth. We have also developed specialist support, through the veterans’ mental health and wellbeing fund and, in England—this is a mouthful—through the veterans’ mental health transition, intervention and liaison service, which provides specialist locations where mental health issues can be looked at.

Jesse Norman: The Minister has referred to the regions and what more can be done. Will there be money set aside for the regions specifically?

Mr Ellwood: I had the pleasure of attending the Remembrance Day commemorations in Belfast at the weekend, and I took the opportunity to visit a veterans charity and to speak about how we can activate and invigorate the covenant over there. I also met some of the hon. Gentleman’s Northern Ireland colleagues, and I will be going there very soon to bring stakeholders together, because I appreciate that there is a different picture over there. We need to work closely at the grassroots level, but we will create a plan to implement the strategy in a way that meets Northern Ireland’s specific needs.

I am pre-empting the Opposition spokesperson, but we need better data. We need to know who our veterans are and whether our GPs are helping them, and we need to understand particular challenges such as suicide and so forth. We are now looking at ways of making that happen and working with the Ministry of Justice so that we can better track what is going on. We check with our veterans 12 months after they have departed the armed forces, and they already go through a transition package, often lasting two years, to make sure they are equipped. As I well remember, moving from the armed forces, where one feels part of a family, a unit, a community, a tribe, and into the wide open world is quite a culture shock, and we need to be there for veterans. We cannot just give them up. Some 90% of those who go through the transition service are in education or employment within six months of their departure.

I hope that I have illustrated my passion, and that of the ministerial team I am pleased to see here supporting me, for the veterans strategy. The Defence Secretary shares that passion and very much wants it to work. We are advancing our support for the armed forces community. To those thinking of a career in the armed forces, I say: I encourage you. You will do things you never thought you would do, you will learn things about your character you never thought you would learn, and when you march on the parade square for the very first time, you will make your mum and dad very proud as you begin to represent the nation. To those serving, in both the regulars and reserves, and to their families, I say: thank you for your service. You allow us to say we have the most professional armed forces in the world. And to our brave veterans—I mentioned Kitchener saying 100 years ago, “Your country needs you”—I simply say: your country owes you. We owe you a debt of gratitude and support for the rest of your lives.
2.42 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Before I start, I must apologise. I might be a little croaky today, but I will do the best I can.

I am pleased that the Government have scheduled a debate on the veterans strategy in Government time. It is vital that we recognise the unstinting service of our brave armed forces men and women and ensure that the best opportunities are available to help them transition into civilian life. This is first and foremost important for veterans themselves, their partners and children, but it also benefits our wider society if their skills are used to best advantage.

Many veterans transition successfully into civilian life, but we want easily accessible early intervention and support services for the veterans who need them. Moreover, we should aim high and be ambitious for our veterans. We want to see the best possible opportunities and the smoothest possible transition to civilian life for all our veterans. Let us not forget that delays in obtaining suitable housing, accessing appropriate educational opportunities and getting a job also have a detrimental impact on veterans’ families.

I welcome the Government’s publication of a veterans strategy, but, as we all know, this is only a first step. There will now be a consultation. Then what will really matter will be the implementation of the strategy, its outcomes and how it actually improves the lives of veterans. I do not doubt that the Minister and his team are committed to improving provision for veterans, but there has to be a genuine cross-governmental approach. As the strategy explains, the vast majority of services for veterans are delivered through Departments other than the MOD. It is not enough for the Government simply to establish the ministerial covenant and veterans board. There must be a genuine commitment from the Treasury to ensure that the necessary funding is provided to local councils, health services, housing providers, further education colleges and the devolved Administrations, so that they can all deliver high-quality services for our veterans.

Time and again, there seems to be a complete disconnect between the warm words of Ministers about their concern for veterans and the way they vote in Parliament, as if the problems have nothing to do with the cuts and policies they have voted for, and as if it was not they who voted to slash council budgets by 50%; who have cut further education funding by over £3 billion in real terms since 2010—25% of all FE funding; who have broken the link between inflation and benefits for the first time ever; who introduced the bedroom tax; and who have not built the affordable homes needed to end homelessness. Fewer new homes for social rent were built last year than in any year since records began. It is often as a direct result of those decisions that veterans are left homeless, unable to access courses to help them into a new job, waiting too long for health care, getting into financial difficulties and even sadly ending up in the criminal justice system. Estimates on the number of homeless veterans vary.

Mr Francois: I apologise, but as the hon. Lady has introduced a note of partisanship into this debate, I have to ask her something. Last Thursday, I took part in a debate on LBC with a vile man called Aaron Bastani, who is a close associate of the Leader of the Opposition. During that debate, he said, first, that the poppy was a militaristic symbol and that it was racist to wear it, secondly, that the Royal British Legion should be abolished and, thirdly, that celebrating the Invictus games was like “putting lipstick on a pig”.

As I understand it, this man is a member of the Labour party. Will the shadow Secretary of State condemn unequivocally those remarks and assure the House that he will be thrown out of the Labour party without delay?

Nia Griffith: As I have already said on air—it is on the record—I absolutely deplore that man’s comments. I reassure Members from all parties that he holds no position of office in the Labour party, that he is not an elected representative, and that he in no way represents the views of my colleagues, many of whom were at their local war memorials up and down the country on Sunday morning, wearing their poppies very proudly. The man is an utter disgrace and I have called on him to retract completely what he said. It is up to the party authorities to consider further action in his case.

Let me go back to homeless veterans. Estimates of the number of homeless veterans vary, but it is truly shameful that anyone who served this country should find himself or herself on the streets. This Conservative Government must take responsibility for their failure to deal with the problem. Rough sleeping has doubled since 2010, and homelessness is a direct consequence of the Government’s decisions on housing and welfare reform and their unprecedented cuts to local council budgets and charities. We cannot deal with homelessness unless we build more homes that are affordable to rent or to buy. Labour is committed to dealing with homeless veterans through our comprehensive plan to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. As we have announced, we would make 8,000 affordable homes available for people with a history of sleeping on the streets, and a Labour Government would build 100,000 affordable homes a year—homes that are affordable to rent and homes that are affordable to buy.

Despite the severe cuts imposed on councils by the Conservative Government, many councils are trying to improve their provision for veterans. I wish to share with the House some examples of the Labour council initiatives to provide homes for veterans, which I have had the privilege of visiting. Cardiff Council has worked with the housing organisation Trivallis and the Welsh Veterans Partnership to deliver a new housing development in Cardiff bay. It is made up of 152 properties, of which at least 15% are allocated to veterans and their families. The Welsh Veterans Partnership also provides help with employment, education and healthcare. It is clear that this multi-agency approach is beneficial to the resettlement and wellbeing of veterans and their families.

I have also visited the Nelson Project, which is part of Labour-controlled Plymouth City Council’s award-winning plan for homes, an £80 million investment to increase the quality and supply of new housing in the city. The project enabled ex-service personnel themselves to help to build a 24-home site, thereby providing them with construction training and other valuable job-based skills. Thanks to that initiative, many have subsequently found work in the construction industry.
Armed forces personnel develop a whole range of skills, and it is vital that those skills are tradeable in civilian life. I know that some work has been done to link the skills people gain while serving in the armed forces to recognised qualifications, but there needs to be a comprehensive system of recognition and equivalence to established qualifications, so that veterans themselves value the skills they have and employers recognise those skills when recruiting. We also need comprehensive provision throughout the country to enable former armed forces personnel to improve their employment chances by enhancing their existing skills or learning new ones. In the fast-changing world we live in, even what we learn today can be out of date by next year, and people may need to retrain or upskill more than once during their working lives. That is why we on the Labour Benches are so committed to lifelong learning. As we set out in our manifesto last year, we will introduce free, lifelong education, delivered through further education colleges, to enable everyone, including veterans, to upskill or retrain at any point in life. That is in sharp contrast to the Government’s cuts to adult education. Of course, one way in which former personnel can gain valuable skills is through apprenticeships. Labour has also made a commitment to set targets to increase the number of veterans who are able to take advantage of such opportunities.

Labour Members also support a guaranteed-interview scheme for veterans, in which former service personnel who meet the minimum requirements for a job would be guaranteed an interview. Some local authorities, such as Labour’s North Tyneside Council, already operate such schemes, and we are keen to see them rolled out throughout the country as a practical way to help veterans with the transition from the services into employment.

Let me turn to mental health. As I have already said, the overwhelming majority of personnel transition into civilian life without any difficulty, so we must challenge any negative stereotype that serving in the forces leaves personnel in some way broken. That is clearly not the case, and I was pleased to see that the veterans strategy makes reference to the work that is needed to challenge the public perception of veterans and to dispel unhelpful myths. At the same time, proper support must be available for those former service personnel who require access to mental health support. The effects and consequences of mental health problems can be devastating.

Earlier this year, the Defence Committee found:

“It is still taking too long for veterans to access treatment when they need it, and levels of care vary across the UK.”

There is particular concern that the guarantee contained in the armed forces covenant—that veterans should receive priority treatment if it relates to a condition that results from their service in the armed forces—is caveated by the phrase “according to clinical need.” The reality is that any meaningful prioritisation is near impossible when waiting times are often far too long, even for urgent cases. The fact is that our mental health services are under considerable pressure, with funding cut by more than 8% since 2010 and the number of mental health nurses down by 6,600.

The strategy aspires to better collaboration and co-ordination of veterans’ services, although there is little suggestion as to how that might be achieved. I am also a little disappointed that the strategy does not do enough to tackle the thorny issue of keeping track of veterans. It is not straightforward because, while some veterans will want to maintain contact with their previous employment through one of the many military organisations, others may not. We need a discussion about the usefulness and the practicality of keeping in touch with veterans.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I declare an interest as my husband is a veteran and a veterans’ champion. Professional services need to become available, but veterans themselves have great skills in understanding the experiences that other veterans have had. I wonder whether Members across the House could come together to agree that peer-to-peer support would also be extremely important for veterans and to support the funding of that moving forward.

Nia Griffith: The hon. Lady makes a valuable contribution to this debate. We would certainly want to look into that.

The strategy does not really consider whether parts of the armed forces covenant should be statutory and not simply aspirational. It does not propose a strategy to develop and maintain greater consistency across all sectors of our public services. The Minister has rightly expressed concern that there is patchiness across the country. There are some fabulous examples of things really working well, but that is not always consistent. There is a debate to be had about the degree to which Government should intervene. Potentially we should be thinking about making some things statutory. Perhaps there should be some requirements to improve consistency across the country.

This morning, I visited the charity Veterans Aid. It is clear from its work that veterans can and do experience many of the same socioeconomic challenges that are faced by society at large—challenges caused by eight years of the Government’s austerity programme. Indeed, among the support that Veterans Aid has provided in the last year is emergency food and money for clothing, needs arising from the problems that many of us see all too often across our communities. It beggars belief that, in 2018, anyone—veteran or otherwise—should need that kind of assistance, but we know that the use of food banks has skyrocketed under this Government.

To be clear, the point is not that veterans specifically are reliant on emergency funds from charities, but rather that it is the political decisions made by the Conservative party since 2010 to slash social security and to impose measures such as the bedroom tax that mean that the real issue is poverty. It is all very well having a strategy that identifies ways to support veterans, but we cannot divorces that from the context of eight years of Conservative cuts. So let us have a proper joined-up approach across Government which increases funding for mental health services, funds lifelong learning and builds more affordable housing. That is what is needed for our veterans and, if this Conservative Government cannot deliver it, a Labour Government will.

2.58 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate about how we should best look after veterans who have given so much in the service of their country.
It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), who is acknowledged by the House as someone who knows a lot about this subject. We are grateful for her remarks. It is a particular pleasure to participate in a debate with a Minister who is passionately committed to the support of veterans and who is respected across the House of Commons as a result. We know where his heart lies and we respect him for it.

I offer apologies to the House for my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who chairs the Defence Committee. Ordinarily he would have spoken in such a debate, but unfortunately he had an unbreakable commitment today. He has asked me to make a particular point in his absence about war widows. There is a key flaw in the current policy around war widows, which is that if someone’s spouse died or left military or war service after 31 March 1973 and before 5 April 2005, and the widow remarried or cohabited, they were required to surrender their war pension or compensation. A majority in that group are the widows of soldiers who were killed during the troubles. They have had to deal with not only the loss of their spouse, but the financial hardship that has been caused to many widows who have wanted to move on with their lives in new relationships. On behalf of my right hon. Friend, I sincerely ask the Minister to give us a commitment that he will at least reflect on this issue and see whether there is more that the Government can do.

I have also been asked to pass on apologies from my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who cannot be with us today. I think that the whole House would acknowledge that he has done a tremendous job as the Prime Minister’s representative for the commemoration of world war one. My hon. Friend has asked me to make a brief point in his absence about the new centre for conflict wound research. He knows a lot about that subject, because a few years ago he undertook a report for the Prime Minister on the treatment of those who have suffered injuries, particularly to their limbs. The new centre for conflict wound research opened on Tuesday at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham. It has been sensibly located close to the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall, which has absorbed the old Headley Court in Surrey.

The case for moving Headley to the Midlands was underpinned by the promise of closer NHS and defence medical services collaboration, so that military and civilian patients and researchers could benefit holistically from complex trauma experience. However, the NHS has not fully engaged with the same enthusiasm as the military, which means that the original vision is falling short. Will the Minister liaise with his colleagues in the Department of Health to see whether something can be done to put this right? The more we learn about treating such wounds and the better we become at dealing with prosthetics, the more that that will benefit civilian NHS patients, as well as, obviously, veterans. It is literally a win-win.

In many ways, this is a timely debate, not least because it comes a few days after the nation paid tribute to its war dead and wounded in the centenary of the armistice, to which the Minister rightly referred in his excellent speech. I believe that this event really captured the imagination of the British people, with ceremonies held the length and breadth of the United Kingdom—from the ceremony at the Cenotaph right down to individual commemorations in villages and parishes around the nation in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In my constituency of Rayleigh and Wickford, I attended four services that day, including the lighting of a centenary beacon in the evening, and I know that many colleagues on both sides of the House will have done the same. As an aside, I know that the weather was variable around the country, and that therefore a number of MPs were prepared to get quite wet in the rain to pay their respects, unlike some other prominent people on the world stage.

In Rayleigh, people across the community have been working for many months to produce 12,000 knitted poppies, which were put together to create a waterfall effect around Holy Trinity church in the town centre. People came from far and wide—much to the delight of local traders—to see this wonderful tribute. Let me take this opportunity to place on record my sincere appreciation to all those involved from my constituency and beyond, including the redoubtable Rayleigh women’s institute, the Hockley and Hawkwell day centre, and the mother of my PA, Adele Jacquin—it is always good to read your staff into the record, Madam Deputy Speaker—who lives in Cheltenham and also knitted poppies for the display. I have often been proud to be the Member of Parliament for Rayleigh and Wickford, but I do not think I have ever been as proud as when I saw that commemorative waterfall unveiled.

At the Remembrance Sunday service, our local rector, the Rev. David Oxtoby, chose to read an extremely fitting poem, “It is the Soldier” by Charles M. Province. It is a brief poem, so I will share it with the House because I think it is apposite:

“It is the Soldier, not the minister
Who has given us freedom of religion.
It is the Soldier, not the reporter
Who has given us freedom of the press.
It is the Soldier, not the poet
Who has given us freedom of speech.
It is the Soldier, not the campus organizer
Who has given us freedom to protest.
It is the Soldier, not the lawyer
Who has given us the right to a fair trial.
It is the Soldier, not the politician
Who has given us the right to vote.
It is the Soldier who salutes the flag,
Who serves beneath the flag.
And whose coffin is draped by the flag,
Who allows the protestor to burn the flag.”

I humbly submit to the House that when we are talking about veterans, that is a fitting tribute.

As well as those who fell in battle, we must remember those who survive and are now veterans of their military service. The question we must ask is: are we doing enough for these people, to whom we owe so much? The Defence Committee is in the middle of an inquiry into veterans’ mental health, to which the hon. Member for Llanelli referred. It is constructive to compare what we do for the physical rehabilitation of veterans with what we do for their psychological rehabilitation.
For physical rehabilitation, we have world-class facilities—formerly at Headley Court, and now at the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre at Stanford Hall. In addition, veterans who have lost their legs can now be fitted with the Genium prosthetic—arguably the most advanced prosthetic limb in the world—following a grant of more than £6 million from Her Majesty’s Treasury to equip all those veterans who lost their legs either in Iraq or in Afghanistan. I am proud to say that I had a little to do with that when I served in the Ministry of Defence.

In mental health services for veterans, however, we are not world class, and there is much further to go. For example, on Tuesday the Committee took evidence from academics and health professionals from around the UK that revealed, among other things, that in parts of Wales and Northern Ireland, it takes almost a year for a veteran who is identified as suffering from mental illness to begin to receive appropriate treatment. That is bad enough for anyone, but for those who have served their country in uniform, it is completely and utterly unacceptable.

One of the challenges in that sphere arises from what could be described as conflict between two different philosophies—the hon. Lady mentioned this as well. On the one hand, we have the armed forces covenant, the two key principles of which are enshrined in law within the Armed Forces Act 2011. The second key principle is that of special treatment where appropriate, especially for the wounded or bereaved. Under that principle and the broader armed forces covenant, veterans should receive priority treatment under the national health service. However, when one asks the NHS, one gets a very different answer: patients will be treated strictly in accordance with clinical need.

A little while ago, we took evidence from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who opened the debate, and from his opposite number in the Department of Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). Unsurprisingly he backed the covenant and she backed the NHS. We need to resolve that dilemma and we need to do so soon. One of those is Leigh Day. The challenge is that of care, not simply access to care, and we need to ensure that we do not have a system that provides care but which does not provide the care that is required. The challenge is that of care, not simply access to care, and we need to ensure that we do not have a system that provides care but which does not provide the care that is required.

As well as the NHS, a number of charities do important work in this field, including the Royal British Legion, Help for Heroes, SSAFA—the Armed Forces Charity—and Combat Stress. As part of our inquiry, the Committee plans to visit a residential centre run by Combat Stress early next month.

Another charity that does very valuable work is Care after Combat, which was founded in 2014 by Jim Davidson OBE, a notable comedian who has given a great deal of his personal time to an extremely serious subject. Care after Combat provides struggling veterans who have fallen into the prison system with a mentor, who is usually a veteran himself, which ensures that they have access to someone with understanding in their final year in prison and then their first year outside. The mentor is often able to have conversations that a GP or probation officer simply would not. They are able to spot mental health warning signs and other issues through more regular contact than a clinician would have, and then to report back accordingly. I would like to see more Government support for what that vital charity seeks to achieve, and I ask the Minister to make a note of that.

I regret to say that there is one area in which the Government are letting down veterans very badly indeed, and that is the whole area of “lawfare” and the legal witch hunting of predominantly Army veterans by others for political or financial gain. This applies to veterans who served in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. In the case of Iraq, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) led the Defence Sub-Committee’s inquiry into the Iraqi Historic Allegations Team, the revelations of which were so appalling that the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), had the team shut down.

However, the Ministry of Defence then effectively created a son of IHAT, which has continued to inquire into Iraqi veterans. We now know that one law firm specialised in bringing cases from Iraq. The ironically named Public Interest Lawyers went so far as to completely fabricate cases against veterans, basically to try to make money out of them. That firm has now mercifully gone bust—no one laments its passing—and its lead lawyer, Mr Phil Shiner, has been struck off.

Other firms acting in this field—not necessarily illegally in any way—have made a great deal of money out of pursuing veterans. One of those is Leigh Day. The Committee hopes to invite representatives of that firm to give evidence to our ongoing inquiry into veterans and “lawfare” to justify their actions to Parliament. If we are successful and they have the courage to appear, I am told that half the Ministry of Defence will take the morning off and come to sit in the Public Gallery—we will need the Boothroyd Room at least. By the way, if they do turn up, they will not receive a fee.

I am afraid that this is also the case in Northern Ireland, where the Northern Ireland Office and the Police Service of Northern Ireland now propose to go right back to 1968—50 years ago—and reinvestigate every single killing that took place in the course of the troubles. The process would be entirely one-sided, because members of the IRA have been given so-called letters of comfort by Tony Blair, meaning they are effectively off the hook. As far as I am aware, no one who has been given a letter of comfort has ever been successfully prosecuted for terrorist offenses. I do not say this lightly, but the Northern Ireland Office, which is one short of its complement today, should be ashamed of itself.

Conversely, there are no letters of comfort for Army veterans, only the prospect of being investigated and, in some cases, hounded for things that happened nearly half a century ago. For instance, an inquest has now begun into killings in Ballymurphy in the 1970s. I understand from press reports that pro-republican lawyers are likely to summon up to 100 soldiers to give evidence. That would take an extremely long time and no doubt cost a vast amount of public money. Let us call this what it is. It is a racket, and it has to stop.

As a result, a couple of weeks ago I and a number of ex-Army colleagues in the House helped to organise a letter from 104 Conservative Members of Parliament, supported by some Opposition Members and 50 peers, including General Lord Dannatt and four previous Chiefs of the Defence Staff. The letter, which we delivered to the Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing Street, called on her to put an end to this outrage that has continued on her watch. I am pleased to say that, as a result, we have now been offered a meeting with the Attorney General early next month.
[Mr Mark Francois]

There are now essentially three strands of potential progress. The first is the Defence Committee inquiry, which is ongoing and will probably report sometime in the new year. The second is the specialist team that has been established within the Ministry of Defence by the Defence Secretary—the Minister will be very familiar with it—which is also looking into this issue. The third is the initiative led by the Attorney General, who I am pleased to say has been tasked by the Prime Minister with trying to sort out this problem.

I and other members of the Defence Committee very much hope, perhaps by some combination of these three strands, that we will be able to find a solution so that people who have bravely served their country in uniform will not be hounded in this way in the future. They are people such as Corporal Major Dennis Hutchings, who served several tours on Op Banner in Northern Ireland during the troubles. He is now aged 77, and he is dying of terminal cancer. Unfortunately, it is likely that he will die before his trial for events that were all investigated thoroughly at the time takes place.

There is also the case of Royal Marine David Griffin, who, at the age of 77, is facing reinvestigation over an incident in 1972, when someone was killed during an ambush in the middle of the night. The nature of the attack he was under means that Mr Griffin has no idea whether it was he or one of his colleagues who was responsible. An investigation was held 46 years ago, yet Mr Griffin now faces further reinvestigation—and they knew where to find him, because he is a Chelsea Pensioner in the Royal Hospital Chelsea.

We now face a situation in which alleged IRA terrorists, with letters of comfort, are away scot-free—they are laughing at us—while we go after Chelsea Pensioners instead. That is, quite literally, outrageous, and it is happening on this Government’s watch. The public, veterans, serving personnel, their families, over 100 MPs and over 50 peers of the realm all believe the same thing—enough is enough! I call on the Government to stop this outrage, and to stop it quickly.

In summary, the centenary of the armistice is a strong reminder of the vast debt we owe our veterans of the past century, and we should give our veterans and their families the best possible support once they have left the service of the Crown. Although, as the Minister rightly said, there has been good progress in many areas, of which the whole House can be proud, there is also one burning injustice: we now seem to be treating terrorists more favourably than Chelsea Pensioners. I ask the Minister—I believe he is with us in spirit, although he cannot say so—to talk to his colleagues in government and for God’s sake make this nonsense stop.

3.19 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) felt the need to resign from her position as Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Ministry of Defence. I think that is a loss to the defence team as she was very good to me and my colleagues when we tried to communicate with Ministers at the MOD. Who knows what lies ahead for her? I think that the consensus between us will perhaps end there for now, as the Brexit debate gets more intense.

I am glad this debate is taking place. I was slightly concerned, given the pressures on time and events this morning, that it would not happen. That would have been a great shame, given that we have just had a whole period of remembrance leading up to Remembrance Sunday at the beginning of the week. It was a pleasure to take part in the main centenary event in George Square in Glasgow city centre on Sunday, which was a very moving affair—the city council confirmed it as the largest remembrance event the city has held in the square for a number of years, which shows the desire there is among Glaswegians properly to remember and show thanks to the armed forces and veterans who have passed in previous wars.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As my hon. Friend will know, I was not at George Square in Glasgow because I was at the Nitshill war memorial service. It was the first time there has been a main service there, and there were 300 people in attendance and 34 wreaths laid by community groups. The Friends of Nitshill War Memorial committee should be thanked for all their work over the past five months.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I echo that entirely, and congratulate my hon. Friend on getting that point on the record.

I also had the pleasure of attending the Queen’s Park football club remembrance service. It will surprise anybody who knows me to hear that it was ever a pleasure for me to be at a football stadium, but this was a particularly noteworthy affair. As well as holding a remembrance service for football players who served in the first world war, some of whom did not return home, the club put together the Great War Project, which documented the lives of those who had played for Queen’s Park football club in my constituency, which is the oldest football club in Scotland. It had invited the families of the football players and soldiers from world war one. I even met a constituent of the now departed Secretary of State for Work and Pensions who was involved in the Scottish National party in 1945. Needless to say, he cannot support us any more from Tatton, but that goes to show the breadth of people that a remembrance event can bring together. I congratulate everybody at Queen’s Park football club on putting together the Great War Project, and I look forward to visiting the Great War Project at Langside church in my constituency tomorrow night.

Let me return to the veterans strategy. I genuinely welcome this document, which is a good starting point for a serious discussion. I particularly welcome the fact that on the veterans ministerial board we have Ministers from devolved Governments, in particular Graeme Dey, who is the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans in the Scottish Government, and the only
angela crawley (lanark and hamilton east) (snp):

i would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in organising remembrance events across south lanarkshire, including south lanarkshire council headquarters which lit up its own building to commemorate the anniversary. my constituent thomas stuart white from carluke received 70% of his war disablement pension and a lifetime award of disability living allowance. however, he was only granted a three-year personal independence payment and he feels it is unjust to veterans that this does not recognise his commitment and his public service.

stewart malcolm mcdonald: my hon. friend is absolutely right to raise that case. i encourage her to write, if she has not already done so, to the armed forces and veterans minister, whom i have certainly found to be attentive in dealing with such cases.

we all have to realise the vast change that will happen in the veterans community over the next 10, 15 and 20 years. there is a whole generation associated with the second world war—we are very low on numbers associated with the first world war—who will be dead in a few years’ time. our veterans community will be younger and more diverse in terms of men and women and its ethnic make-up at time goes by. any new strategy we implement has to take cognisance of those changes. the expectations of veterans and ex-forces personnel will change as well. they will expect more from the government and more from local government. they will expect better, joined-up service delivery from local and national government.

different models around the world that we can learn from, and we should not be afraid to ask some pretty big questions. for example, does it need to be the ministry of defence that is responsible for veterans’ services? in the united states, there is an entirely separate government department for veterans’ services. new zealand has a separate government department. in south korea, a veterans council is responsible for the implementation of veterans’ services and strategies. we know—let us be charitable—how stretched the ministry of defence is at this particular juncture, so perhaps we could be asking these types of big questions and question whether the models and the set-up we have really will serve people best in the future. we could learn from the danish model when it comes to supporting members of the armed forces who go on to become veterans and ex-forces.

most of the members here in the chamber regularly attend debates on defence. they will know that the scottish national party has called for the establishment of an armed forces federation. in fact, we introduced a bill to that effect. i know many members do not agree with that, but i am not convinced we are serving them well at the moment. members of the armed forces do not have a statutory body to advocate on their behalf. they really just rely on members of parliament. i hate to point it out, but when one looks at the numbers who are here today less than a week on from remembrance sunday, we have to think that perhaps members of parliament are not the best ones to always rely on—exceptional circumstances do exist, of course. but why can veterans not have a body, similar to the police federation, which has a role in statute to argue for better terms and conditions for them and their families while they are in the armed forces, when they leave the armed forces, and, as others have mentioned, for that crucial transition phase.

we need to better codify the role of the veterans champion. sadly, about 10 minutes after the minister got to his feet, glasgow’s veterans champion, who was in the gallery, had to dash off to euston to get his train back to glasgow. in scotland, we have 32 veterans champions, one of whom is the husband of my hon. friend the member for east kilbride, strathaven and lesmahagow (dr cameron). there are 32 different people doing this across scotland—I am not sure how many there are in the rest of the uk—and there is not any real code to say what their job is or what their responsibilities are. someone might be in glasgow, where we have a really active and excellent veterans champion who operates within the city council—within the local authority—but then they might cross the boundary into another local authority and find that that is not the case.

i get the feeling that part of why we do not codify this is that it will end up costing more money, but that cannot be a reason not to do so. i speak to veterans champions who are full of the best will in the world but who are not entirely sure where their role fits within the council. in glasgow, for example, our veterans champion is not an elected member of the council, which i think is a good thing. it gives them freer rein, but in my understanding, in most local authorities they tend to be lord provosts—the scottish equivalent of the town mayors that exist in england and other parts of the uk. it is absolutely a worthy role, but exactly what the role of a veterans champion is, and is not, needs to be tightened up.

i come to the issue of suicide among veterans. i agree with the minister that we cannot allow the myth to be perpetuated of the broken warrior, as it were, but at the same time, we cannot ignore failings in the system. on the issue of suicide, it is my understanding—I think the minister said this at the dispatch box and in comments to the media at the weekend—that there will be moves to start recording suicides among those who have served in the armed forces but who no longer serve.
[Stewart Malcolm McDonald]

Two weeks ago, I sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Justice and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice in the Scottish Government asking how this would work. My understanding of English law, limited though it is, is that this would have to happen through coroners in England—I think that coroners exist in Wales and Northern Ireland as well, but we do not have coroners in Scotland, so presumably it would fall to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service there. Where there are changes to that in England or Scotland, I hope that we can do this in a joined-up way and that we ultimately get to the place we all want to be, where we have proper figures so that we can better understand and tackle these issues.

In summing up—I am conscious that other Members want to get in—I welcome the publication of the strategy and the fact that we are having this debate in Government time. There is a debate next week on the armed forces covenant as well, and that is a good thing. It is good to see that there is now some pretty strong parliamentary impetus behind this, but I say to Members here and Ministers: let us not be beholden to any sacred cows. Let us think big. Let us be bold and let us all work together to make each of our communities the best place possible to be a veteran.

3.33 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and I thank him for his kind and generous words. He can be assured that while I may not be in government, I will continue to believe that defence has nothing to do with party and everything to do with the nation and those who have served us, and that all of us have a responsibility to them. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be their advocate when necessary—be that the families, those serving or those who have left the service—and to support them by lobbying Ministers in whichever Department we are required to.

It is a real pleasure to stand here in a debate in Government time about veterans—those who have served. When I arrived here in 2015, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) helped me to understand that there had been a loss of impetus from the Government in speaking about military matters in the Chamber. A number of us have taken that as a challenge over the past three years, and it is fantastic that our incredibly passionate Minister, who took on this role last year, has driven forward the determination to have these conversations more widely and to push out there the issue of those who serve and have served.

I want to mention a very special remembrance event last weekend in Berwick—that most northern point of England. Twenty-five of the most northern parishes came together in Berwick parish church to lay wreaths. We held a vigil on Saturday night. The wreaths were placed in the shape of a cross in front of the altar, which was moving in itself, then four of my young cadets from the army cadet force came to each corner of the cross. They stood there from 7 pm until 11 pm, without moving, as the names of all those who had served in world war one and world war two were read out slowly by an extraordinary group of people, the representatives of each parish, old and young. There were many there who were new to their parishes, and many whose families had been part of that community for 100 years.

It was profoundly moving to see those young men and women, whom I know well because I spend a lot of time with them, standing to attention and respecting not only those who had died but the armed forces. I know that three of them want to enter the armed forces themselves and take on the extraordinary challenge that is faced by all members of the forces. It means a really exciting career and learning exceptional skills, but it also means a willingness to put their lives on the line if necessary to defend us and our nation. That will never cease to amaze me, and to fill me with the utmost respect for every single one of them.

When I set up the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant when I was first elected, I wanted it to speak up for armed forces families. The covenant put something very good into law, but I began to discover things accidentally, as so often happens when a person becomes an MP—we discover all sorts of subjects with which we have had no particular relationship before. Military families came and talked to me about their struggles and the issues in their lives, from school places to housing to medical assistance. You name it, they were all there: the challenges of moving around, the challenges of not having a base and the feeling that the system could not support them.

Three years on, it is really exciting to see a strategy for veterans that has a wrap-around effect on their families as well. I pay tribute to the Minister, who I know has battled with the system to get it to where it is now, and also to his team. I have worked with many of them over the past year, and I know that they have put in an enormous amount of work to reach the beginnings of a strategy that will be incredibly supportive to all the families.

I want to raise a number of issues about which my knowledge has grown over the last three years, and on which I think we can make progress in the years ahead. One of them is the question of money. Families who are seeking support in relation to a particular issue—as well as veterans, and, in some cases, those who are still serving—say, “It is so complicated. There are so many charities. I don’t know where to go. It is very difficult. How do I start?”

For a long time I worked in the north-east with a group called the Community Foundation. That extraordinary organisation, which has now spread across the country, originated in the United States. Regional charities’ finances are held together in a pot so that the money that they all hold can be used in a better way. Members of a central board can direct those who come seeking support to the right charity, so that an individual who is probably in distress, or is battling other issues, does not have to go hunting for the right support. There are more than 3,000 charities, many of which hold very small amounts of money and have a particular focus. A charity may have been set up by a family who had lost someone who served, for instance.

If we could draw charities together to work in a collaborative, central way so that people seeking support could go to a central point and a board would direct them, that would relieve them of a great deal of stress.
There is so much support out there—it may not be in the part of the country where we live, but that does mean that it does not provide the right specialist care for the person we are seeking to support. I will leave that suggestion with the Minister, but I should be happy to follow it up and see whether we can have a more cohesive conversation with charities. I have spoken to some of them about that already.

The veterans gateway, which was set up last year, is a great start in that it provides people with an initial central point to go to. During its first year it has responded to many questions, from “Where can I get my medals replaced?” to “My husband is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and I do not know where to go.” An extraordinary range of questions have been sent down that telephone line. The team are working to build the network and signpost people in the right direction, but the question I would ask is, are we really tracking whether the right outcomes are achieved for those who call? I am not sure that we are there yet.

Sometimes there may be an easy question for which there is an easy answer—big tick, it is sorted. That is fantastic. But I remain concerned that people are signposted to a charity that ought to be able to help, but no one from the gateway is then checking that they have actually received that help. So they may end up back in the ether, still struggling to find the support that they need. I ask the Minister to set out—or to consider, if this is not being done—how we can have a real tracking system so that the outcome of the support the gateway is supposed to provide is actually achieved. Some of the cases will be difficult, and will not simply entail making a direct phone call to the next person, with the solution then being provided.

That brings us on to a wider question about the MOD’s responsibility to look after veterans. That question has frustrated me, because one reason why the covenant was such a great thing for David Cameron to put into law in 2011 was that that is not only the MOD’s responsibility. Although the MOD does of course have a duty of care to those who have served and have needs afterwards, that should be a cross-Government project. The veterans board was a great start, and I am grateful to the Member for Sevenoaks (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for battling to get it into the manifesto so that it could come to fruition at the end of last year, but I am not sure that every other Department understands the vital contribution that they each make, because veterans and their families are affected by their work just as everybody else is.

If the covenant is to be real, we must realise that we have committed as a nation to giving veterans and their families support without question. That is what the covenant means to me: it means that we value them for the rest of their lives. As the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) that we should consider taking the covenant to a higher statutory level, rather than simply having it setting out its vision. The MOD’s job is to defend us; that is its purpose—to be prepared for war, to have the deterrents to try to prevent war from happening, but to have soldiers, sailors and airmen ready to take us to war if necessary. That is the MOD’s job, whereas the job of the NHS is to look after us if we are sick, and the council’s job is to provide people who need a house with housing and to look after education services. All those issues affect veterans and their families, because they are participant members of our society for the rest of their lives. So we must continue to question whether we leave the responsibility for the covenant in statutory terms in the hands of the MOD, or whether the Government and Parliament should consider taking it to a higher level.

I receive many letters such as the following one, which is from a serviceman’s wife, because families contact me all the time. I apologise if my voice breaks while reading it, as it is not an easy letter to read. I will read it anyway, because it illustrates the issues we are struggling with:

“I write to you to tell you of my experience of living with a husband who has PTSD following his tour in Afghanistan in 2010.

This weekend may have potentially seen the end of our marriage and there is a real risk my husband will self-harm to end his life. His behaviour has caused me to ask him to leave. He has gone to his Grandма’s and my understanding is his parents have contacted the correct health authorities to get the help that he needs. They have moved faster than any of our local authorities have here. He has previously presented at his local GP who told him to self-refer to a local mental health charity. I find it shocking that people have to “self-refer” when they have a mental health condition. The temptation is to just go home and do nothing, brush it under the carpet, do it another day, ultimately delaying treatment.

He has received community CBT and EMDR from people who have absolutely no experience in dealing with conflict trauma. The hospital he presented at yesterday said the treatment he has received has been a sticking-plaster no more, no less, and that he is seriously ill.

This has been ongoing for eight years. For eight years I have had to live with his financial mismanagement and deception, which has taken a sinister turn over the weekend. His actions are not compatible with a stable marriage and for the sake of my children and I, I have asked him to leave to seek treatment.

I have never received any support from the military as to how I deal/manage with my husband’s PTSD. My husband likewise hasn’t had any contact from the Army. I just cannot comprehend this lack, and total disregard, for their duty of care.

He was medically discharged for physical injuries he sustained during that tour in 2014. He served in Helmand as a platoon commander leading young men at a young age in an area that, without exception, was the most dangerous place in the world. How can the army not follow up with serving members of the forces to check they are ok when people have died on patrols that they have led? People who have lost limbs, have spinal fractures, have been injured in an IED explosion themselves. How can they not check that the families have the support that they need? How can they risk more potential casualties in the form of suicide? I am alone in facing this. The government cannot delegate their duty of care to charities. Relying on people to approach them.

My husband talks a good game. On any vague assessment he would present as healthy. He hid his pain. For 2 years as he felt others had it worse. This ended his career. He will likely be wheelchair bound at 60. In terms of his physical injuries, his Regiment have utterly failed in their duty of care. He has never been treated at any of the army rehabilitation centres because a doctor only spotted the physical injuries 2 years post tour when he presented for something else. He didn’t fall into the category of ‘conflict wounded’. He has had to rely on community treatment...
I leave that with the Minister. It is not a new request, but it is one we need to drive forward. The carrot mentality is just not enough to ensure that families get the support they need when they need it.

3.50 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the impassioned contribution from the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who is a huge advocate for veterans and, indeed, the Royal Marines. Commitment to and passion for those men and women serving in and leaving the world’s finest armed forces can surely be found on both sides of the House. As the Member of Parliament for the home of the Royal Navy, that is heartening for me to see.

I will keep my remarks brief this afternoon. Along with many Members of this House, I spent last week at remembrance services, selling poppies in my constituency. Needless to say, we in Portsmouth were again profoundly moved by and deeply proud of the bravery and sacrifice of service personnel past and present. Pride in our armed forces comes naturally to my city. As the home of the Royal Navy, we know personally of the remarkable courage and expertise in service of those generations that have fought for our country. That is why I am so passionate about ensuring that our Government, our public services and the economy work to support them during their service and beyond, during their transition back to civilian life. So I thank the Minister for his statement today; it was hugely helpful to hear.

This is not a party political issue. Personally, I could not care less from which party or place support for our veterans comes, so long as it is comprehensive and generous. This strategy is at least a good start—it certainly makes lighter reading than today’s withdrawal agreement. I await the results of the consultation with great interest, and I anticipate serious policy commitments. Specific and effective policy is needed because, as has been mentioned by my colleagues, the challenges facing veterans are serious and deserve a response of equal weight.

The Minister may recall from my correspondence with him my support for the armed forces covenant, and I am proud that Portsmouth City Council has recently received the gold award. Equally, however, he may recall my urging him to give some teeth to the covenant and for it to go further.

The same could be said about this strategy and the Government’s support for veterans generally. I wholeheartedly endorse each and every one of the key themes set out by the Minister’s Department. Co-ordination of services, data collection and proper recognition for our veterans—these are all things I have been campaigning for and absolutely support. However, to be realised, they require timely action from Government. That is especially true of the shocking lack of worth our veterans feel is placed in them by the wider population. According to a heart-breaking report by SSAFA, 62% feel undervalued by society. I was pleased to see that recognition of veterans was a key strand in the veterans strategy. I also greatly welcome plans to introduce an official veterans ID card, and perhaps the Minister could update the House later on progress on that.

It is clear that action to improve life for veterans does not have to be hugely costly or complex to be effective. I will confine my remarks to an issue that is not only
particularly pertinent, but something whose treatment it would be simple to improve. That issue is mental health, and specifically data collection on suicide rates.

I should say from the start that we should in no way stigmatise our armed forces personnel. The majority of ex-servicemen and women adapt very well to civilian life. The skills required in the forces are unique and an extremely valuable addition to the existing talents that those in our services often hold. As the Minister and other Members of this place can attest, life in the forces can prepare great success in civilian and even public life. That does not mean we can afford to lose sight of those in our armed forces who do need support and care.

The UK is almost unique in not requiring coroners to mark an individual as a veteran. As a result, only one of the 98 coroners in England and Wales does so. That is something almost all our allies do, including Canada, America and Australia, because it makes sense. This is important and useful data about and for the veteran community.

How can we possibly go about solving this issue if we do not know the scale of the problem? The Ministry of Defence currently puts the tri-service suicide rate at eight per 100,000, which is notably lower than the 15.5 per 100,000 rate that the Office for National Statistics reports among the general male population. I have no doubt that everyone in this House would welcome that state of affairs but, put simply, significant research from the Royal British Legion and my own conversations with the veteran community suggest that it does not reflect reality. The fact is that we do not know for sure, which is exactly my point.

In answer to my written question of 8 October on the plans that the MOD and the Ministry of Justice have for introducing such a recording duty on coroners, the Minister said he had had no such conversations with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice. Perhaps he could say today whether he might consider introducing a coroner recording duty as part of the veterans strategy. The move would fit well with the Government’s aim, as stated in yesterday’s document, of enhancing the collection, use and analysis of data across sectors to effectively address the needs of veterans. I believe the measure would have broad support from the public and the military, including from General Sir Dave Richards. I urge the Government to listen and to capitalise on this commitment to veterans.

I also pay tribute to the campaigning of the Portsmouth News and the Sunday People, and specifically to the dedication of Portsmouth veteran Stephen James, who has developed a fantastic peer-to-peer chat app, All Call Signs, to connect former services personnel, allowing them to support each other directly when mental health difficulties arise.

We owe services personnel far better than to turn a blind eye. Inevitably, the data itself would not help us to reduce the number of tragic incidents, but it would be invaluable in bettering our understanding of the issue, which is crucial if we are to tackle it. Again, I encourage the Minister to incorporate this commitment to veterans.

3.57 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), who is clearly a champion of the personnel who serve or are based in his constituency.

Most veterans and ex-services personnel have a positive experience of military service and many, like one of my sons-in-law, gain skills and experience that benefit them as they migrate to civilian life. They form lifelong bonds with their service colleagues in many cases, and it was poignant at the recent Remembrance Day services in both Ayr and Cumnock to witness for myself the strong bonds among the veterans and ex-services personnel who came together to remember their fallen friends.

Despite the morning weather in Ayr, it was a pleasure to see so many of the young generation turn out on that Sunday—I am sure it was the same in Glasgow—and that has to be applauded and welcomed. I thank Rev. David Gemmell and the poppy knitters of the auld kirk of Ayr for a wonderful display. The auld kirk was bedecked in colourful poppies that enriched the service that day.

For some veterans, however, their military career was not such a positive experience, and whether or not the root causes of the mental health issues experienced by services personnel are a direct result of that service, it is crucial that veterans receive proper support during and after their military service. I am pleased to see that support is foremost in this veterans strategy.

The UK charity Combat Stress operates the wonderful Hollybush House facility in my constituency, affording support and sanctuary for former members of the British armed forces who are suffering from mental health conditions such as PTSD. Clearly, treatment is free of charge to all veterans, and, most important, it is provided by a dedicated team of professionals based there. For the small minority who do not immediately adapt to civilian life as they migrate from their service days and who lose their way momentarily or, as sometimes sadly happens, for a lifetime, the veterans strategy and veterans gateway services at Hollybush House are to be welcomed. Together with the new veterans units, they will improve the response for those in need.

Additionally, there are charities such as Care after Combat, whose stated aim is to change people’s lives for the better. It is working with the NHS, a great player in assisting our veterans, to support veterans who have fallen foul of the justice system in an effort to reduce reoffending. Unforgotten Forces comprises 15 leading organisations, led by Poppy Scotland, which together afford enhanced support to veterans and ex-service personnel aged over 65 and to their families in Scotland. That is to be welcomed and applauded. Clearly, wide and able support is available in the voluntary sector, and the key word is “voluntary”: many of these people give of their time freely to assist our veterans and ex-service personnel.

I am pleased that the Government have, in this strategy, outlined what more can be done centrally to support veterans. Apart from the invaluable armed forces covenant, which has been discussed and to which at least 3,000 organisations have now signed up, veterans will also benefit from the Department for Work and Pensions’ Disability Confident scheme, and the Career Transition Partnership has successfully supported some 200,000 veterans into new careers after their service since its inception some 20 years ago.

This Government have done a great deal to support veterans, but we cannot be complacent, as the task is not at all complete. As I have previously mentioned in this House, I very much welcome the extra funds announced in the Budget to support veterans, which are in addition...
to the funds the Government previously committed to support the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust. I also welcome the consultation mentioned by the Minister, which is soon to get under way, but we have to pay attention to the outcome of that consultation. There is no point in having a strategy that is simply put on a shelf; we have to act as a Government and as a nation to ensure that what we learn from that consultation is applied effectively.

I welcome the scope of this strategy, which will ensure that our veterans receive the support they need well into the future. Should a veteran stretch their hand out for help or assistance, this nation must grasp that hand firmly and give them that assistance, which they so richly deserve. I wish to personally thank those whose military service has protected me, my family, my constituents and indeed this country over many years.

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

As of July, I count myself as a veteran, having served 12 years as a reservist in the Royal Regiment of Scotland. I am very proud to wear the regimental tie today, just as I did on Sunday, when I went to George Square, as I am very proud to wear the regimental tie today, just as I did on Sunday, when I went to George Square, as I have done for several years, to join many of my friends at the cenotaph to remember our friends who have suffered life-changing injuries and, in my case, a good friend who was killed in Afghanistan in 2013. That is a moment for us not only to reflect, but to get together to have a good old time — there is a social aspect. For many people, particularly those who have worn the uniform, Remembrance Day is about not just solemn remembrance, but having a bit of a laugh, which is always good. We did get on to talking in great detail about many of our friends who have suffered, and in the past few months alone, the Royal Regiment of Scotland veterans have taken it upon themselves to set up a Facebook group to try to help each other.

It has been eye-opening to see the difficulties that many people are going through but which they often cannot make clear to their comrades. There is a culture, particularly in the Army, of not talking about these things. Instead, people have traditionally been told to man up, get on with it and pull themselves together. In the past, it was an admission of weakness for someone to say that they had difficulties, so it is great that people feel that there is now a safe space in which to make those vulnerabilities clear to their friends and to seek help.

In that spirit, I welcome the thrust of the veterans strategy, particularly the cross-cutting factors that have been identified, which chime with what I would like to see happen. However, I am concerned that the document is too high-level and that there is not enough understanding of the intended outcomes. There is a broad intent, which is laudable, but a lot of details about how it is to be delivered are lacking. The term used in the Army is “mission command”: beginning with a general intent, but then building up a fuller picture of what is to be delivered on the ground. It is ironic in an organisation with an effective command-and-control system built into its DNA that when it comes to supporting our veterans, that seems to fall apart and the same rigour is not applied. I would like that to be addressed as part of the further development of the strategy. This is crucial for collaboration between organisations and the co-ordination of veterans services. The urgency burns through and needs to be gripped.

A lot of charities are doing excellent work and many have been mentioned today. A great example in the city of Glasgow and the wider area is the Erskine Hospital, which was founded over 100 years ago by one of the Yarrow family whose son was killed on the battlefields of the first world war. So riven with guilt was he that he formed a charity along with William Macewen, one of the leading surgeons in Glasgow at the time, to create the first proper prosthetic limbs to help those who had suffered life-changing injuries in the first world war. The charity continues to help veterans of all ages to this day.

We have to recognise that the demography of our veterans is changing. The Army has downsized by around 20,000 regular soldiers in the last five years alone. That is a significant outflow of people, many of whom will have served in conflict zones — very intense conflict zones at that — and those people will have very particular and urgent needs that need to be catered for. I do not feel that there is any sort of infrastructure to deal with those specific requirements, however, and that needs to be dealt with.

I have spoken about this next issue several times in the last few months, because many of my friends and people I know personally have been affected. Indeed, we lost four Jocks from the Royal Regiment of Scotland in the space of two months, in July and August this year, which is a terrible suicide rate. Indeed, it is estimated that over 50 veterans have taken their own lives in the last year alone. We have to recognise the true scale of the problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) talked about data collection, and we need to get a grip of that. Other countries have shown the way on how to deliver it, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) hinted at. We need more robust infrastructure that assists in identifying veterans so that we can then help them.

Often, when we think of a veteran, we think of someone who has heroically served their country and then left on good terms to go off, be of good character and deliver in civilian life. Technically, anyone who has served one day in uniform is a veteran, and many will be discharged in difficult circumstances, such as for drugs problems or reasons of chaos in their personal lives. They will leave on unhappy and difficult terms, and simply to cast them out and not give them the right support is to fail them.
I think of the four Jocks who have taken their own lives in the last couple of months. In many cases, they had already reached out for support. I spoke to Combat Stress about members of the Royal Regiment of Scotland who had sought help for PTSD. Many had identified themselves. Indeed, one of the men who tragically took their life, Jamie Davies, had been recording video diaries of his experiences. They are haunting to watch now in the knowledge that he ended up taking his own life. His descriptions of the difficulties he encountered are harrowing. To think that we all failed him is something we have to take cognisance of.

The sooner we get the strategy robustly developed and delivered meaningfully, the better. We cannot simply have these high-level aspirations; we need a robust plan that actually tells us in root-and-branch detail what we will do differently. That is what we need to understand.

The charities do a great job, but many people who go to charities, and particularly veterans, get some assistance—they might get cognitive behavioural therapy, for example—but find that it does not meet their needs. It is often a box-ticking exercise—"Right, we've consulted this veteran. He's presented himself and we've dealt with it"—that might not resolve the issue, and there is no ongoing support once the course of treatment has finished. They then fall through the net and find no way out other than to take their own lives. That is the tragedy that is happening.

It is not that we do not know that these people are there. We know they are there, but we are just not robust enough in helping them, which is why we need to look into having a structure that takes its inspiration from the command-and-control structure that is embedded in the armed forces so that we can robustly deal with these issues. My view is that a caseworker ought to be appointed to every veteran who leaves the armed forces as a single, consistent point of contact to whom they can turn, regardless of the length of time since they left. That would be an ideal structure, because veterans often fall into the gaps between different charities and organisations. They have to go through the same history and issues, and end up overwhelmed with frustration. They disengage from the process and find themselves lost—and then they are lost to their friends and family as well, when they take their own lives. That is the true carnage that is being caused and its cost.

We do not know the true scale of the situation—the people we identify may be just the tip of the iceberg. Veterans who find themselves in prisons will not identify as veterans. Veterans who find themselves with mental health problems, drug addiction or alcohol addiction will not identify as veterans, because they do not want to embarrass their friends—they do not want to embarrass their cap badge. We have to get a grip of this issue, on a number of fronts.

I welcome the strategy in broad strokes. The cross-cutting factors that have been identified—improvements in data on the veterans community, public perception and understanding, recognition, and, most importantly, collaboration and co-ordination—are laudable, but that does not go nearly far enough. We have a crisis on our hands in this country, and it is an ever-looming one, as more than 100,000 people in our country have served in the theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan in Operations Telic and Herrick. If we do not help them, an absolute epidemic of mental health problems will be visited upon us. The needs of the world war two generation are different from the needs of the generation—my generation—that has served in conflict zones in the past 15 or 20 years. We have to get an understanding of how to tailor services to their needs. I welcome the Government's strategy but, echoing the sentiments expressed from the Opposition Front Bench, we need to go much further to get a grip and to deliver for our service personnel—we owe them nothing less.

4.12 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and particularly to follow the powerful speech made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), given the personal tales we have just heard. He was right to say that it is very welcome that people can now talk about their experiences. An awful definition was used a century ago when there was the idea that people who had seen absolutely appalling horrors of war somehow “lacked moral fibre” because they had finally broken after several years of unimaginable experiences. Nowadays, we recognise that there are some things that would break anyone. At the end of “Blackadder Goes Forth”, there are those poignant last three minutes of humour in the most dark of situations. Captain Blackadder says that he pretended to be mad and then realised

"who would have noticed another madman around here"—they would have to be mad to be in that trench and in that war. What the hon. Gentleman said was very welcome, and it was also very welcome to see him, as someone who has served our country, wearing his regimental tie proudly.

I welcome the overall tone of the debate, starting with the Minister's speech. I pay tribute to the speeches made by the hon. Members for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who spoke on behalf of their respective parties. That tone has continued right the way through the debate. It is welcome to have debates on veterans' issues to ensure that veterans have a voice in Parliament and that their needs are heard here, and that is important because of how things have changed. If we had been having this debate 50 years ago, virtually everyone in this Chamber would have seen action in world war two or world war one. At that time, well over 90% of Members of Parliament were male, and virtually all would have been of an age that meant they had faced conscription in either world war one or world war two, or national service and the Korean war afterwards. The whole of society was full of people—obviously men, at that time—who had seen heavy combat and heavy action.

What really brought the situation home to me was the challenge faced by veterans coming back from Afghanistan. Those individuals came back to a society in which, actually, most people had not had the same experience as them. At a dinner of the armed forces all-party group, I heard a commander say that the casualty rate of his battalion in Afghanistan had been the same as that of one of its predecessor battalions in the Somme offensive. Thanks to modern medicine, however, not so many people died, as many great interventions were made to keep people alive. Fundamentally, however, the wider impact of being killed or seriously injured in Afghanistan was roughly the same as that of the Somme. That really brought it home to me, but a person who
comes back from Afghanistan is not returning to a community where every man in the street has had the experience of being either at that battle or another one, which might make them feel very isolated and alone.

That is why, in such debates, I like to pay tribute to the Royal British Legion. I certainly welcomed the comments from the shadow Secretary of State for Defence about the individual member of her party, and it is worth saying that there are many members of the trade union and Labour movements who have died for this country. They have worn our uniform and served to ensure that we can live in the democracy that we have today. I do not think that we should take the views of one—to put it bluntly—idiot and try to paint that as the views of an entire movement that has sacrificed so much to protect our democracy. Clement Attlee, of course, stood shoulder to shoulder with Winston Churchill when this country went through its darkest hours back in the 1940s, and he was clear that appeasement and surrender were not an option in the fight against the evil that was National Socialism.

I particularly want to pay tribute to my local RBL, which not just works with veterans, but provides that link between the military, veterans and the wider community—the community of people who might never have served, but want to support their veterans. I shall start by looking at the work of Paignton Royal British Legion, which is one of two branches in my area. It is led very well by its chairman, John Kavanagh, who is a veteran himself. He takes great pride in his military service and in leading the team. What the branch did for the centenary came from a fitting idea from its secretary, Donna Fortune, about bringing to life the war memorial, which lists the names of 224 sons of the town who volunteered in world war one and never came back. The idea was to have a candle symbolising the light that went out in the first world war, and each candle bore the name of someone on the memorial.

On Remembrance Sunday, as we marked the 100th anniversary of the armistice, young people from the town took a candle from the local parish church, which many of those who fought in the war would have known as it is still pretty much as it was at that time, and took it to the memorial to lay it there. What was particularly fitting was that these young men and girls were about 15, 16 and 17—the age of those who went off to fight. That served as a reminder to many people because sometimes when we go to remembrance parades, we look at older veterans. We therefore might make the mistake of thinking that people who fought in these wars were older, yet the reality is that those who lost their lives and made the ultimate sacrifice were young men from the town who volunteered, went off to do their bit and then never came home. For me, it was very moving to see the memorial in the evening with the candles lit as a reminder of those sons of Paignton who gave their all so that we can have the free Parliament that we have today. I also wish to pay tribute to Don McKechnie, the poppy appeal organiser for the Paignton branch, who has worked so diligently on this year’s successful appeal.

The other RBL branch in my constituency is in Torquay. Its secretary, Arthur Christian, who is a veteran, combines running a local estate agency with supporting the branch. His team worked very hard to produce a superb tribute to the centenary on Torquay seafront on Sunday, which was one of the largest events that we have had in a long time. Back in July, a new standard was dedicated at the local church, and that was specifically done so that it could be paraded at Great Pilgrimage 90, which marked the 90th anniversary of veterans of world war one plus families who had lost loved ones in those famous battles going out to see the cemetery. For those colleagues who have not done this, I can say that it is quite thought provoking to stand at Tyne Cot and look back down at what is called Passchendaele ridge.

It is not much of a ridge, more of a low incline in the middle of flat land. It is where the defenders were ready and waiting and from where they could see into the town of Ypres and see our forces advancing, as those men attempted to assault positions on that ridge. For many, it was where they lost their lives. Sadly, many were not found or, if they were, could no longer be identified by the end of the war.

Veterans are an amazing part of our community today, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South and the Minister were absolutely right. It is easy in these sorts of debates to talk, rightly, about certain issues that affect veterans, but we should also remember that they are an amazing part of our local communities. Eighty per cent. of working-age veterans are in employment and three quarters own their own home, either outright or with a loan. Many are doing brilliant jobs, using the skills they learned in the military in their careers. Without them, our society would be much poorer, not just because of the technical skills they learned in the Army, Navy or Air Force, but because of the ethos of service and putting nation before self that they bring from the military into whatever their career is.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), I have met with Care after Combat and heard about its work with those for whom, sadly, civvy street is not working and who have ended up in jail. It is concerning that an estimated 3,500 former servicemen are currently in jail. At the moment, Care after Combat can reach one in 10 of them, and its work has an impact. First-year reoffending rates among those it has engaged with are much lower, and when they are no longer incarcerated, that is a good outcome for them and the taxpayer.

I was pleased to see the Secretary of State also attend that event and see that commitment and support. I hope that we can hear more from the Minister in his winding-up speech about what support will be available and what is happening across Government to ensure linked-up support. It is not about education; it is about engaging with veterans when they are in prison to ensure that they can come out to a home, to support and, particularly if they have engaged in such a scheme, potentially to find employment.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, I also want to touch on veterans and lawfare. I used to be a criminal defence lawyer. Our armed forces are there to uphold the rule of law, and not one member of our armed forces community would wish to see a situation in which the armed forces were above the law. However, it is clear that the balance of investigatory effort and attention paid to matters of the past, particularly in Northern Ireland, has been completely disproportionate. Veterans who were investigated by the
relevant authorities at the time now face having to relive potentially difficult experiences decades later. These are incidents where little if any new evidence is likely to be produced, where many of the witnesses will have passed away or where, bluntly, what witnesses may be available might not be the most impartial individuals and where what they wish to say might have little probity or value.

I know that the Minister is committed to finding a solution to this. I know, too, that that is reflected by the Secretary of State, and it is welcome to hear about Attorney General’s work, but I know from my criminal justice background that we have always had the principle of double jeopardy in our system. It is a good principle, and although these cases might not have been taken to court for a formal verdict that would trigger that legal principle, perhaps it could be extended into this area, so that, unless something staggeringly new comes out, where things were clearly investigated and considered at the time, they should not be matters that we look to reopen.

For veterans, like all others, housing is an issue. As we look to tackle our housing problems more generally, this is an area that could benefit veterans and certainly make a difference for them. It is right that we can be very proud of our veterans community—certainly in Torbay we are very proud of them. There is support for them and work is put together, but it can always be better and taken further.

I appreciate debates and I always welcome the opportunity to take part in them. I am conscious of the time and of the fact that we have a rare opportunity to hear from my good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I know is a passionate advocate of our armed forces and our veterans, so I will close my remarks by repeating that I welcome this debate and the tone of it. I hope that veterans listening to it feel that this is an area that could benefit veterans and certainly make a difference for them. It is right that we can be appreciative, and that we will provide the services they need.

4.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). I think I have intervened quite a few times now. I am usually the last speaker, but I am pleased to contribute to the debate and thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me.

I have a registered interest as a former serving soldier in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years, and in the Territorial Army, Royal Artillery reserves, for 11 and a half years. The veterans strategy means a great deal to me, not only because of my personal interest as a former part-time soldier, but because the constituency I represent, Strangford, has a good history of interest and service in all the services, whether the Army, the RAF or the Royal Navy.

Like the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Jim Shannon), I attended four remembrance services last Sunday. The first was at 8 o’clock in the morning at Cloughhey, the second at 11 o’clock at the cenotaph in Newtownards, our major town, the third at 2.30 pm in Ballyhalbert, and then there was a church service at 7 o’clock in the evening. At every service, I was struck by the turnout of youth organisations, including church groups, the scouts, the Boys’ Brigade and the Girls’ Brigade, and the cadets. While we noticed those who were missing from the year before, we were greatly encouraged by the number of youth organisations that were on parade. The next generation is coming through, which is good to see.

I thank the Minister for referring in his introduction to the new consultation document. He can expect to receive some applications from my part of the world. It is good news that money has been set aside regionally, so we can all benefit. I know that is what he always wants, and it is what we always want as well.

Looking about at the remembrance services, we noticed the older veterans, of course, but also the number of people in the crowds who were there to watch and support, wearing their medals with pride. It was a reminder that veterans walk among us every day and are not simply older pensioners. When I saw those men and women standing in solemn remembrance, straight backed, medals on their chests shone to within an inch of their life, I felt the deep frustration and anger to which other Members have referred.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford is no longer here, but he mentioned certain things that I hope to speak about as well, because it is important to put them on the record. I thought of the depth of frustration and anger that would cause a veteran to ask his constituency MP, the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), to return his medals to the Prime Minister a number of weeks ago. I do not know more than what I read in the press, but the reason for that was the witch hunt of ex-service personnel in Northern Ireland due to the Irish Republican agenda to rewrite history. Men and women in their 80s are waiting for a letter questioning them about events that took place some 45 years ago. I thought of that as we thought of our veterans on Remembrance Sunday last week.

It is right and proper to acknowledge the 100-year anniversary of the armistice, but I believe it is also right and proper to acknowledge that we owe a duty of care to the veterans of service in Northern Ireland. We are not fulfilling that duty satisfactorily, with respect and as well as we can. It is estimated that some 300,000 military personnel were deployed in Northern Ireland in the course of Operation Banner, which I served in myself. It was the longest running military operation in the history of the British Army and incorporated service in many aspects throughout the troubles.

Many of those men and women who participated carry the scars of that today. Those soldiers who bravely put on the uniform to serve Queen and country are now sitting in their retirement home or their own home frantically trying to recall what they had worked for years to forget, having knowingly put their lives on the line in the battle against the lowest of the low terrorists—terrorists who believed they were justified in firing into a gospel mission hall in Darkley; terrorists who believed they had the right to blow up a war memorial in Enniskillen with women and children surrounding it; and terrorists who had no qualms whatsoever about sending false information to ensure the biggest fatality of innocent people doing their shopping in Omagh.

For many of those veterans, the pain and trauma of the past is very real. They have memories of holding their dying friends in their arms, of sifting through rubble and human body parts, of the screams of anguish, and of the fear of that car driving slowly up to their
checkpoint. While sitting here, I thought of one story in particular. One of the first UDR men to be killed was a fellow called Winston Donnell in Strabane. A car reversed up towards him and IRA gunmen shot him. He was one of the first to die.

These veterans have memories of the fear of speaking to anyone when off duty and wanting to grab a beer, for fear of a honeytrap, or a beating when their British accent was heard. I often think of the three Scottish soldiers who were murdered in Belfast; they are very much on my mind. All those things are re-traumatising veterans, as we allow them to be re-terrorised in order to provide a sop to the republicans, who have no shame about anything they did and inexplicably wish to rewrite history to seem justified.

There was and is no justification for the murder of my cousin Kenneth Smyth on 10 December 1971 outside Clady in County Tyrone. There was and is no justification for the murder of Lexie Cummings, also a former UDR member, in Strabane on his lunchbreak. And there certainly was no justification for the murder of the four young UDR men at Ballydugan outside Downpatrick, three of whom I knew personally. There can never be any justification for that. This debate on the veterans strategy must incorporate a promise to stop allowing republican murderers to justify their actions.

No one was held accountable for any of those murders. No one was ever held accountable for the murder of Lexie Cummings. The person who did it worked across the border in Sligo and is a prominent member of Sinn Féin. The person who carried out the murder of the four UDR men at Ballydugan got his just deserts in Downpatrick some time later, but the fact of the matter is that seven other people were arrested, and whatever their role may have been, they were not held accountable either. We need to stop allowing republican murderers to justify their actions at the expense of the mental and physical health of men and women who did nothing wrong, other than to dare to be British and to serve their Queen and country.

Any veterans strategy must incorporate support for those questioned and put an end to the questioning by police. The fact of the matter is that veterans who served in Northern Ireland and who live in Northern Ireland get a raw deal. They still have heightened security concerns due to their service and yet have no benefit from serving.

We do not have a right and proper implementation of the military covenant due to the section 75 element of the Belfast agreement, which has given 20 years of excuses for republicans to continue their hatred and persecution of anything that is slightly related to being British. I am proud to be British and proud to be part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I often refer to myself as a proud Ulster man who lives in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Those 20 years of excuses for republicans to continue their hatred show the power of section 75. The Minister referred to it earlier, and I hope we can move that along. I know that discussions are ongoing, and I hope we can get some satisfaction. The most ironic part is that it was those veterans, whom they hate so much, who gave them the right to have section 75 to start with.

I hope that Members will forgive me if I repeat the poem read by the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford. I heard it for the first time last week, on Remembrance Sunday, when one of the young people there was doing readings at the Cenotaph. The poem reads:

“It is the Soldier, not the minister
Who has given us freedom of religion.
It is the Soldier, not the reporter,
Who has given us freedom of the press.
It is the Soldier, not the poet
Who has given us freedom of speech.
It is the Soldier, not the campus organizer
Who has given us freedom to protest.
It is the Soldier, not the lawyer
Who has given us the right to a fair trial.
It is the Soldier, not the politician
Who has given us the right to vote.
It is the Soldier who salutes the flag,
Who serves beneath the flag.
And whose coffin is draped by the flag,
Who allows the protestor to burn the flag.”

These soldiers did not do a shabby job. They did the best they could in situations that we cannot even begin to imagine. We need to stop being shabby to them.

If we medically retire a 30-year-old soldier who joined up at 18—the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) gave us an example from her constituency that I must say very much resonated with me—we need, without going into too much detail, to ensure he has a place to live, training for a job that is suitable to his service and, vitally, mental health support to help him to deal with the trauma and scars that service has left.

Dr Deirdre MacManus, a lead consultant psychiatrist at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust, which runs the transition, intervention and liaison service in London, has said:

“We have seen a greater than 100 per cent increase in referrals over the last six months... We still get soldiers who served in Northern Ireland coming.”

Almost 50,000 veterans have mental health issues, which are often sparked by combat stress. Another 6,000 are homeless and 10,000 are in prison or on probation, as others have mentioned. We need to address those issues as well. I ask myself the question, but I also ask the Minister: are we doing enough? We do look to the Minister for such support, and I have no doubt whatsoever that it will be forthcoming.

How can we do this better? I want to be able to look the veterans in the eye when I meet them, as I do in my constituency. As I always do, I will meet them on Remembrance Sunday next year. When I tell them, “We are remembering you”, I want to be able say that we have done something in this House to make the situation better.

I want to refer quickly to the charities. SSAFA does tremendous work. I have held a coffee morning for it every year since I became the Member of Parliament, which has raised almost £30,000 for it over those years. Help the Heroes and the Royal British Legion, of which I am a member, also do tremendous work. The hon. Member for Torbay mentioned the Royal British Legion and the great work it does. I suppose it is the principal port of call for most people.
May I also give a plug to Beyond the Battlefield? The Minister will forgive me for saying this, but he knows I will refer to it. It does tremendous work in getting to the people who are under the radar, such as those who do not register with the associations. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed mentioned how associations do not always pick them up, but it is funny how Beyond the Battlefield seems to do so. Whether for benefits, housing, health issues or the appeals, it is there and it does tremendous work. So many people across Northern Ireland are indebted to it for the hard work it does. All these charities do phenomenal work, but that should be additional work, not the only support. That is the point we are trying to get to, if we can.

I will conclude, because I am conscious that the shadow Minister and the Minister want to speak. I believe it is time that we enabled the talking in here to be turned into action out there. I believe—I will reiterate this again, as others have—that the urgent thing is to enable the talking in here to be additional work, not the only support. That is the point we are trying to get to, if we can.

4.37 pm

Gerald Jones (Mertthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond to this constructive and positive debate on behalf of the Opposition.

Those who work in our armed forces deserve our thanks and appreciation, and they also deserve support should they require it when they leave service. As we know, the transition can be difficult for some. The veterans strategy is an opportunity to set out what additional support may be required and how the Government—in partnership with devolved and local government, and the voluntary, charitable and private sectors—can come together to offer a co-ordinated and holistic range of support services. Labour’s recently published social contract for veterans guarantees support in areas such as housing, mental health and retraining, and I would like to see the veterans strategy developed to offer a similar guarantee.

During this afternoon’s debate, we heard from the Minister about the importance of the covenant, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), and he spoke about the patchy delivery of the covenant across the country. In areas where we have committed armed forces champions, they are driving the covenant forward. Sadly, however, that is not the case everywhere.

We heard from the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), about the genuine need for a cross-Government approach to highlighting support for veterans. She talked about the Government’s poor record in some areas with regard to public service cuts, and about the austerity those cuts have brought to a lot of the services on which veterans and others rely.

We heard from the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who raised the case of war widows. He also talked about the range of remembrance events and the display of knitted poppies that he visited last week. That reminded me of my visits to St David’s church in Merthyr Tydfil, which had a very moving display, “For the Fallen”, in the week leading up to Remembrance Sunday, and to St Tyfaelog’s church in Pontlottyn, which also had a very moving display that included a wall of poppies outside the church.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) highlighted the change in demographics over the next 10 years, and raised the issue that will face us of younger veterans who have different needs from those we are used to. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) spoke about the veterans gateway, the need to ensure that queries are properly dealt with, and the need for clarity on a tracking system. A moving account from a veteran’s wife highlighted the lack of support for veterans who suffer from poor mental health. We all agree that more needs to be done on that issue, and that is something that Members throughout the House will support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan)—home of the Royal Navy—said that the comprehensive strategy is a good start and easy to read, but that it needs to have teeth, as does the armed forces covenant. We also need more data on suicides to enable us better to prevent them in future, and to recognise the scale of the issue. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke about mental health and the need for support. He mentioned the Disability Confidence scheme, which I was pleased to launch in my constituency last month.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) welcomed the cross-cutting elements of the strategy, but said that more detail is needed on crucial issues of collaboration. He also mentioned the change in demographics, and gave a moving personal account that recognised the scale of the mental health issues facing our veterans and the need to do more to prevent suicides. The hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) praised the excellent work that the Royal British Legion does across the country, which we would all echo. The hon. Member for Strangford also mentioned the unique situation in Northern Ireland, where there are a lot of veterans who have put their lives on the line, as well as the work of charities and other support services.

Let me reiterate that Labour supports any strategy that seeks to provide additional support to our armed forces. The strategy includes much that we welcome, including on the need for greater collaboration and co-ordination among agencies, the need to improve the public perception of our veterans, and the need to promote greater recognition of the contribution made by our armed forces veterans, so that they in turn feel better valued by the country. However, although there is much we welcome, it is essential that the strategy, and any support it outlines, is funded properly. We have heard a number of times during the debate, not least from my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State, that the services used by many veterans are provided by local authorities and other public bodies—organisations that have had their budgets cut significantly under the austerity agenda pursued by the Government since 2010.

I know that many colleagues in local government would dearly love to provide enhanced services and additional support to our armed forces veterans—indeed, many authorities, public bodies and, increasingly, private companies already try to support veterans and the wider armed forces family through the covenant. However, those organisations, particularly those in the public and charitable sectors, are hamstrung by the lack of financial support from the Government, and although we all support the need for more to be done, the Government must ensure that their strategy is properly funded.
Like the armed forces covenant, the strategy provides a vehicle to co-ordinate support for our veterans, and we welcome it. However, perhaps the Minister will answer a few key points. Has he, or any of his colleagues in the Department, had contact with the Treasury about the need properly to resource local government and the devolved Administrations, so that we can provide our veterans with the very best support? Will he join us in calling for an end to the deep cuts that we have seen over the past eight years?

As we have heard, the armed forces covenant provides important guarantees to our veterans, but there are long-standing concerns about patchy provision. What is the Department doing to ensure that the covenant’s promises become a reality for our veterans community and that the strategy does not simply represent more warm words?

Finally, we have heard from colleagues this afternoon, including the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford and the hon. Members for Torbay and for Strangford, about the worrying issue of false legal claims being brought against members of our veterans community. It is now more than 15 months since the Conservatives pledged to get to grips with this issue in their 2017 election manifesto. Will the Minister tell us when we can expect to see some firm proposals?

Mr Ellwood: With the leave of the House, I have the pleasure of concluding this cross-party debate on supporting our armed forces, which has been frank and fair. It is pleasing to see the energy of Members on both sides of the House who want to continue our commitment to supporting our armed forces—those in uniform, their families and those who transit into civilian life and are again able to offer something back to society. I am grateful to all hon. Members for their contributions today.

I would first like to pick up on some of the points raised by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). We are absolutely working to try to identify more funds. He will be aware of the pressures, but there are pockets of funding to be found. It is important that we have greater collaboration and co-ordination on the support that is required for veterans across all levels. We have a further opportunity to debate that next Thursday when we scrutinise the covenant, and I very much look forward to that.

I would like to touch on other contributions. The shadow Defence Secretary spoke about implementation and outcomes. I absolutely agree that it is important to look at them when considering the strategy, and I hope that will be a part of the consultation process. She also touched on an interesting aspect of this issue, which is apprenticeships. We have, I think, more apprenticeships than many other Government Departments. We are very proud of that, and apprenticeships are a key contributor to what our armed forces can do.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) passed on a number of messages from Members who understandably could not be here today, including the Chair of the Defence Committee. It is also right that the whole House pays tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who did an incredible job as the Prime Minister’s envoy promoting and organising the world war one commemorations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford and others also touched on lawfare issues with regard to what is happening to our veterans in Northern Ireland. He hinted at my personal view, which is on the record. This is a matter for the Armed Forces Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—I have spoken to her about it recently, and we do need to advance the issue. I am aware that it has taken some time, but I know that she is aware of how serious it is and the awkwardness of those who have served and retired completely having to think back to what they did 40 to 50 years ago. We face a very strange situation.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) spoke about Danish models and US models. I touched earlier on the fact that we are sharing best practice on supporting veterans with other nations. He talked about the role of the veterans champions in Scotland, and I am pleased to see that they are in place. I hope that the consultation will address the issue of co-ordination.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) for all the support she has given me personally during her time at the Ministry of Defence. It is clear that she is passionate about defence. I know she will continue, wherever she sits in the Chamber, to be an advocate for our armed forces.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) was very proud, quite rightly, to speak about the home of the Royal Navy. He made light of the fact that the veterans strategy makes for lighter reading—I hope—that is certainly shorter, and possibly might last longer as well—who knows?

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The Whips Office did not write that one.
touch on. The partnership is absolutely critical. Its work is advancing, and it is doing an incredible job of making sure that we look after individuals and tailor programmes that take people through the necessary steps of crafting their CV and seeing where their strengths are. I underline the incredible and often unique skillsets that people pick up in the armed forces, but it is also fair to say that many businesses are not so familiar with how those skillsets can be used in new contexts. The Career Transition Partnership programme deals with exactly that.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said that collaboration between veterans services needs greater co-ordination. I hope that we can continue to provide that, and it is part of what the veterans strategy is intended to achieve through consultation. That must be a critical objective.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) gave a passionate speech about the importance of supporting our veterans. He also rightly articulated how our veterans become part of every aspect and every walk of society. In some cases people would not necessarily know that, because a veteran may have retired some time ago, but veterans do incredible jobs. It might simply be about going up to a veteran and saying, “Thank you for your service.” That gives me licence to promote the veterans breakfast clubs, which are a brilliant initiative. One a week is now opening up. They are simple operations. A café might just put a sign up, saying, “Veterans meet here at 8 o'clock on a Wednesday morning”, and then like-minded people turn up, with different experiences, but feeling valued—that is what it is all about—and being thanked for their service.

Finally, there was the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As I said, I want to do some more work with Northern Ireland specifically. He mentioned Operation Banner, and he knows that I served there. He raised many of the issues that we continue to need to work on. I am pleased to be able to go back there and see how, in the very specific circumstances of Northern Ireland, we can advance the covenant and our responsibility and duties to our brave veterans and service personnel there.

I end simply by saying that all this is about our armed forces. It is about our ability to remain in a position to say that we have the most professional armed forces in the world. We can only recruit the next generation of potential service personnel if they know that they will potentially serve people once they depart the armed forces. It is important for us to be able to defend our shipping lanes and support prosperity in other parts of the world, where it might be threatened.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr Ellwood: Very quickly.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It is a very quick question. I am guessing that work on the next SDSR will probably start next year. When will we finally see the modernising defence programme?

Mr Ellwood: What is pertinent is that we are now moving towards the spending review, which will provide for the five-year cycle and show where our armed forces funding will go. However, that veers away from matters concerning veterans.

Let me reiterate my thanks for the contributions that have been made today, and for the cross-party support for our armed forces. I end by saying thank you to all who have served in our gallant and brave armed forces.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): What an excellent, good-tempered and positive debate—I do not mean to sound surprised!

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Veterans Strategy.

PETITION

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

4.56 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The petition reads as follows:

The petition of residents of South Walsall,

Declare 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 guidance 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.

[P002289]
Community Broadband Schemes

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

4.58 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): This is the first time that I have had the opportunity to lead an Adjournment debate. I am delighted to do so, today of all days, and to raise an issue that is of prime importance to my constituents. For a rural constituency such as Stirling, the issue of broadband continues to be high on the list of priorities. I promised in my maiden speech that I would continue to raise the issue of connectivity in Stirling, and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so today. I want to see all Stirling’s communities digitally enabled, connected by fibre or wireless, and I look forward to the day when I can get a mobile phone signal and a 4G service throughout my constituency. We are seeing some progress, but there is still some distance to go.

I want to talk about several broadband issues, including the difficulties that communities face when they set about improving their local broadband service. The first point that I will make—and it is an obvious point—is about what we mean when we use the word “fibre”, because it is important to understand what is meant by it. Fibre-optic cable provides high-speed data connectivity. We should be clear about the difference between “fibre” and full fibre. “Fibre” is not full fibre; full fibre to the premises is capable of gigabit speeds, and is a solution fit for the future.

Most users currently have a much slower, less reliable and limited hybrid service that depends on pre-internet copper infrastructure that was designed to carry phone calls and not data. It is just not honest advertising to describe a hybrid broadband connection as “superfast fibre broadband”. The Advertising Standards Authority should take a closer look at, and a more stringent approach to, the truthfulness of these claims, because they are plainly misleading.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Stephen Kerr: I hope that the Government will take the opportunity today to send a signal to the industry to get its house in order. Stirling’s broadband infrastructure is sub-optimal. It is inadequate and is not future-proof. It needs investment, and it needs intervention. While there is much in the way that BT has invested that is commendable, I cannot help but remain concerned that its investment plans remain based on commercial viability, rather than the requirements of delivering a truly national infrastructure network.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue to the House. Broadband is important to every one of us. If we represent a rural constituency, or a constituency with a mixture of urban and rural areas, the issue is very real. Does he agree that the 100,000 people in Northern Ireland who do not have access to superfast broadband have a right to the same service as people who live perhaps 10 miles away in the towns? More must be done to remove what he has referred to as the postcode lottery and to enable small businesses to operate to an acceptable standard in the rural communities where they are based.

Stephen Kerr: I completely agree. There is a need for investment to create a truly national all-inclusive infrastructure network.

BT’s lack of investment in solutions for exchange-only connections is an example of what I am talking about. This will continue until we see a real divergence between BT Openreach and BT itself. Openreach should be charged with the delivery of this national infrastructure system to allow Britain to become a truly digital nation and an economy fit for the future.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I am following my hon. Friend’s speech with great interest. He represents Stirling and we all think of Stirling as being the city of Stirling but it is a large rural constituency much like my constituency of Banff and Buchan, and we face similar issues, as we have discussed. We are often told that what we have to overcome are the technical, geographical and topographical issues, but these same premises have power cables and water lines going through the same topographical areas. It is actually a matter of cost.

Stephen Kerr: My hon. Friend makes a good point and I will come on to address some of the issues he has kindly raised.

It amazes me, when I listen to the stories of community broadband groups in my constituency, that community broadband schemes ever happen at all. It was a pleasure to be present at the official launch of the Balquhidder community broadband in March this year. Balquhidder is the resting place of Rob Roy MacGregor, perhaps the glen’s most famous son; he was an outlaw, thief and folk hero. It is a scattered rural community in one of the most beautiful parts of Scotland, which can also now boast one of the fastest broadband connections in the UK.

That is down to David Johnston and Richard Harris, two of my constituents, who belong to Balquhidder and who are real heroes in my eyes. They have shown true determination and grit to get this project through. I have met Richard and David many times and their perseverance and tenacity, and indeed that of the whole community, in the face of immovable slow government and unhelpful bureaucracy is inspiring. It is an example of the power of the people. David Johnston met my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) when he was Minister of State at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in Stirling to discuss the project. I invite the Minister to come to Balquhidder to hear Richard and David’s story for herself, because although the project came to fruition this year it started way back in 2007. Their experience was extraordinary; it was of official meeting after official meeting and of a series of ongoing disappointments and setbacks. When they started out, BT and the Scottish Government both withheld critical information from them about where upgrades would be happening and which communities would benefit from public funding. That meant that community schemes the length and breadth of Scotland were held up by indecision and dither.
European state aid rules cover broadband investment. That means that, when an area benefits from state-funded infrastructure, it cannot benefit from a second investment. These European rules narrow the field of Government aid, and that has meant that community schemes have been on hold for years while BT and the Scottish Government try to work out behind the scenes what their priorities and plans are. To some extent, we are still waiting, thanks to the state of dither they are in.

It is worth noting that these rules are widely and regularly ignored by other EU countries. The interpretation around intervention in digital infrastructure is a particularly egregious example of where the rules are not only infuriating but actively detrimental to our economy. Imagine for a moment if the EU told us we could not build a road, install a water pipe or upgrade a railway. It is a basic job of Government to ensure that critical national infrastructure is provided, including broadband infrastructure in rural communities. However, because public money is being used, they must conform to an endless litany of rules and regulation.

A similarly convoluted story is told in the Trossachs area, in a beautiful rural community in Stirling around the village of Brig o’ Turk and the visually impressive Ben Venue. This community pursued a wireless technology solution. It explored interesting and innovative technologies, only to be let down by Stirling Council, which finally scrapped its community broadband group in favour of taking direct political control. That was a regrettable decision and many community groups have expressed their frustration to me about that decision.

Many other issues impact negatively on community broadband schemes. They include the difficulties communities have establishing wayleaves with public sector organisations, especially the Forestry Commission, which see such things as an opportunity for revenue and profiteering, and the withdrawal of the UK broadband voucher scheme, which happened with no notice. That was another regrettable decision that left some communities without a viable scheme to draw resources from and no clarity at the time on what would replace it. I know that a replacement scheme has since come in, but the capriciousness of Government remains a real issue for community schemes.

The plethora of Government schemes thrown at communities is also a real problem. Community Broadband Scotland failed miserably in its objective to fund and develop community schemes. Its dithering and ineptitude have caused many community groups to turn away from this path. Then there is the involvement of Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband, which has done some good work but lacks transparency about its priorities and plans. That leaves communities without a clear idea of how they can get involved in bringing broadband to their community. Broadband Delivery UK has been slow to act in Scotland and, as I have said, has left communities high and dry by abandoning schemes and being unclear about its approach to local full-fibre networks in rural Scotland.

I have previously said in this House that I am concerned about the use of the national productivity investment fund for broadband investments, as recently outlined in the Budget speech. That is of absolutely no help to my constituents, or to Scottish constituencies. It is money that will be Barnettised and passed to the Scottish Government and, on past performance, the Scottish Government will not invest the money but continue their dithering.

Of course, this is not the only budgetary issue that affects my constituents. In England, the UK Government have created legislative measures to provide 100% business rates relief on new fibre infrastructure. In Scotland, we still await any like-for-like measure from the Scottish Government. Balquhidder is saddled with this cost, as are community schemes the length and breadth of Scotland. Again, while the UK Government act, the Scottish Government dither. In Scotland, the Scottish Government posture, claiming credit for every good thing, while blaming the UK Government for everything else. How, I ask the Minister, has this been allowed to happen?

Can the Minister assure me that her Department is fully cognisant of its responsibilities for broadband provision in Scotland? My hope is that she is open to my gentle but forthright encouragement that the Department should be seen to be far more active in Scotland than it has been. Scottish taxpayers pay toward expenses in reserved areas such as this, just as English taxpayers do, and it is not right that the UK Government should be handing over this reserved area to the ineptitude of the Scottish Government and stepping away.

We have seen some improvement over the past year, and I pay tribute to Ministers in the Department for their approach, but I hope the Minister will take the opportunity of this debate to commit to further action. The SNP has done with broadband what it has done with every issue: it has turned it into a grievance-inspired wedge so that it can talk about independence. That is as predictable as it is tedious, as the SNP does the same with health, education, transport, finance and agriculture—the list goes on.

Now we come to the real problem with broadband in Scotland. The Scottish Government have led communities down a garden path with promises of a shining city—a digital Jerusalem, if you will—and with their much-vaunted R100 project. The object of this project is to deliver by 2021 broadband services with a speed of more than 30 megabits per second to every household and business in Scotland. I commend to the Minister the Audit Commission report from this year. It is bathed in the language we would expect of auditors, but it identified a clear problem with the R100 scheme, in that the timescale is unachievable given that the contract will not be awarded until next year—2019—and the objective is for 2021.

There is no adequate, long-term overall strategy. The Scottish Government’s objective is totally unrealistic. They are touting R100 as a catch-all solution to Scotland’s digital gap, as if saying the word often enough will get everyone to believe that. That approach belies the complexity and difficulty of getting the remaining properties connected to a superfast internet connection.

It is time for the Minister to reassess this issue and the UK Government’s whole approach to broadband delivery, especially in Scotland. Our vision should be for universal fibre-to-premise provision. We all know why that is necessary. We all know it will create jobs and allow people to live in remote and rural areas, such as those that make up most of my constituency. We all know this is about educating the young, building viable businesses and providing remote healthcare into the future.
We should set an ambition of achieving a fully digitised, connected United Kingdom with a universal service of fibre to premise. That level of ambition will endow the British people with a technological edge. We should support communities to deliver that in every corner of these islands. It is time for the UK Government to really step up to the plate and to deliver for Scotland what the Scottish Government have consistently failed to deliver.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on securing this important debate on community broadband schemes, which are valuable mechanisms that allow people to group together and work with operators to deliver broadband in their local areas. My hon. Friend is to be congratulated on his passion, his commitment and his knowledge of the issue of rural broadband.

I agree about the importance of supporting rural broadband, given how absolutely essential a decent broadband speed is for individuals to lead their lives today. Broadband is as important as any other utility, and it is fundamental to the country’s growth, prosperity and competitiveness.

The Chancellor has set ambitious targets for full-fibre, rather than copper, roll-out, aiming for nationwide coverage by 2033 and to ensure that at least half the country is covered by 2025. Rural broadband is a particular priority for this Government, and we are focused on ensuring that the whole UK, including Scotland, benefits from this new strategy.

Everyone should be able to participate in our digital society to use Government services, to complete homework, to communicate with family and to work in the digital age. Of course, future opportunities and benefits from remote healthcare and learning, and technologies such as artificial intelligence and the internet of things, mean that 5G will have to be available to everyone in the future, no matter where they live or work. That will also depend on fibre roll-out. The Government are working hard to make sure that that happens.

We published the future telecoms infrastructure review in July 2018, setting out a national long-term strategy for digital connectivity to meet the Government’s full-fibre target. I agree with my hon. Friend on the definition of what we mean by a full-fibre connection. We do not mean a hybrid version; we mean fibre to the premises. I sympathise with what he said about what I agree is misleading advertising.

We recognise in our strategy that although commercial investment will deliver in most parts of the country, there is a case for Government support for investment in those areas where a commercial solution is highly unlikely to be found. We are committed to reaching those rural areas first, in what we call the outside-in approach. Those living in such areas—around 10% of the country—will be able to benefit from gigabit connectivity at the same pace as the rest of the country with public investment. Everyone should be able to benefit from world-class connectivity, and we are committed to nobody, and no part of the country, being left behind.

We have made good progress. The £1.7 billion Broadband Delivery UK superfast programme has provided access to superfast broadband for 4.75 million homes and businesses that would otherwise not have got such connectivity, and we have now reached 95% access to superfast broadband for the country as a whole. I recognise that that still means that 5% of the country, an above average amount of which is in rural areas, is still waiting for superfast connectivity.

Despite the success we have enjoyed, there is a tough challenge in remote areas, including parts of my hon. Friend’s constituency. As he said in his eloquent speech, there is clearly more that our Government, and indeed the Scottish Government, can and should be doing. The Government have invested more than double the per-head funding for the superfast programme in Scotland compared with England, which has enabled Digital Scotland to provide superfast access to 93.7% of premises in Scotland.

As my hon. Friend said, we are investing £200 million in the rural gigabit connectivity programme that was announced in the Chancellor’s Budget a few weeks ago. The programme will bring full fibre to remote and rural areas, delivering improved connectivity that is reliable, gigabit-capable and future-proofed. It will mean that people living in rural areas will no longer have to put up with slower speeds than those in urban areas. That will provide the connectivity that businesses in rural areas need to survive and thrive, and the recent evaluation of the superfast programme showed a combined increase in turnover of £9 billion for local businesses that benefited from that roll-out.

The rural gigabit connectivity programme will trial models for local hubs in rural areas, starting with primary schools, alongside vouchers for funding full-fibre connectivity to tens of thousands of homes and businesses across the UK, which will benefit from a fibre spine that will enable gigabit-capable connections. The project will be delivered directly through providers, and that applies to the money that is being made available to Scotland as well. We will work with agencies, including the Scottish Government, to identify suitable schools and public buildings, but the money will go to providers, not the Scottish Government directly. The public buildings will likely be in areas that are sparsely populated and mostly rural, including the borderlands, as well as Cornwall and the Welsh valleys. Community broadband schemes can play a valuable part in improving connectivity in such rural areas, particularly by driving innovation and participation locally.

My hon. Friend detailed unsettling accounts of the bureaucratic difficulties that have been posed to community operations that seek to benefit from the community broadband project schemes. I congratulate his constituents David Johnston and Richard Harris on persevering against the odds to establish the Balquhidder community broadband project. I also congratulate them on winning the Scottish rural action transport and infrastructure award for 2018 for their fantastic efforts. That really should not be as difficult as my hon. Friend has detailed.

I have something encouraging to say. We constantly work, through the very good barrier-busting taskforce that we have established in the Department, to break down barriers in rural areas. We have worked to give providers greater rights to access land and a fairer price for exercising their wayleaves, and we are considering introducing legislation on reinforcing wayleaves’ rights
of access and new builds, so we recognise what my hon.
Friend has said and we are taking action. As a precursor
to legislation, when parliamentary time permits, the
barrier-busting taskforce has issued a lot of guidance to
local bodies and providers on how to use the changes in
rules that we have at least overseen in the past 18 months.

Community broadband schemes play a very valuable
role, and we want to encourage community networks.
We have published guidance on our website to help to
support those who are interested in following this route.
We do recognise the challenges and complexities, and
we want to work with partners to ensure we are able to
mitigate risks and challenges, particularly in places such
as rural Scotland and the Welsh valleys. All that builds
on our £290 million investment into the local full-fibre
networks programme and the gigabit broadband voucher
scheme. They have already benefited many rural areas
and aim to catalyse the commercial roll-out of full-fibre
broadband. Both programmes are UK-wide, and I am
pleased to say that we have already seen a high level of
engagement with the programmes in Scotland. The
Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire area was selected as one
of our market test areas for the gigabit broadband
voucher scheme, and the highlands made a successful
bid for £4.7 million in the first round of the challenge
fund. These interventions will help further to reduce the
footprint of the R100 programme. We welcome the
Scottish Government’s commitment to that programme,
and officials are working closely to ensure that the R100
superfast ambitions can align with and support our
full-fibre ambitions.

As well as this vital work to deliver connectivity that
is fit for the long term, we have also introduced the
broadband universal service obligation, which will ensure
that, by 2020, everyone across the UK has a clear,
enforceable right to request high-speed broadband of at
least 10 megabits per second. The USO is designed as a
safety net and will at least ensure that no one has to wait
to access Government services and to start to take part
in our digital society, but the target of delivering nationwide
full-fibre coverage by 2033 is challenging and will require
industry, the UK Government and the devolved
Administrations to work together. The fact that we
successfully hit our target of 95% superfast coverage is
a huge credit to the hard work, skill and commitment of
the Broadband Delivery UK team and all our partners,
including Digital Scotland, and I thank them. I also
commend my predecessors in my current role: my right
hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock),
the former Secretary of State; and my right hon. Friend
the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizy).

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for
Stirling. I look forward to hearing more about the
success of the community project he spoke about in the
House today, and to building on that success and
encouraging other community projects to take inspiration
from his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

5.25 pm

House adjourned.
Children in workless households are five times more likely to be in poverty than those in working households. Does the Secretary of State agree that work is always the best route out of poverty and that our reforms are beginning to transform lives for old and young?

Amber Rudd: I very much look forward to my visit to Stirling. My hon. Friend has made a good point; work is the pillar of a strong economy and a strong society. We believe that work should pay, but we need a welfare system that helps people into work and then supports them when they are in work. Universal credit will result in an extra 200,000 people moving into work and will enable people to work extra hours during the year, empowering a great working nation.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her position.

Regrettably, unemployment in Wolverhampton is going up and the numbers in my constituency remain stubbornly high. What are the Government’s policies and what are they going to do to bring down unemployment in areas such as mine?

Amber Rudd: The best way to bring down unemployment is to have a strong economy. The Government are focused on making sure that that is what we deliver, but I also hope that the roll-out of universal credit, with the benefit of work coaches, will help the hon. Lady’s constituents to find the work that they want to do.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to her position.

There are only 220 registered unemployed people in my constituency and nearly 2,200 children living below the poverty line, which tells us that poverty is far more complex in its causes than we sometimes think. Would the Secretary of State consider introducing mandatory poverty impact assessments for all Government policies, including those that have a specific impact on rural communities such as excessive transport and housing costs, as well as the likely impact of withdrawing the basic payment system for farmers?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman has raised quite a few points. Let me start by congratulating his constituency and nearly 2,200 children living below the poverty line, which tells us that poverty is far more complex in its causes than we sometimes think. Would the Secretary of State consider introducing mandatory poverty impact assessments for all Government policies, including those that have a specific impact on rural communities such as excessive transport and housing costs, as well as the likely impact of withdrawing the basic payment system for farmers?

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Mr Carmichael: According to the Resolution Foundation, the value of working-age benefits has fallen by 6.4% since 2014. What does the Minister think it tells us about the Government of which he is a part that the Chancellor’s priority in the Budget was to give a tax cut to higher rate taxpayers like him and me, rather than addressing that?

Justin Tomlinson: The reality is that the poorest fifth in society are £400 a year better off in real terms, and the richest fifth in society are £800 worse off.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The report from the UN special rapporteur on poverty in the UK was scathing. Professor Alston referred to a “punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach” and the “misery” that it caused, in relation to the cuts and changes to the social security system, including universal credit and the freeze on benefits. Does the Minister agree with him that in the UK, poverty “is a political choice”?

Justin Tomlinson: We disagreed with the findings, but we did take the opportunity to share our record of delivering record employment, a simplified benefits system that helps some of the most vulnerable people in society and 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty, as well as our proactive work with stakeholders, which is delivering real life opportunities for all in society.

Universal Credit

3. Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to support claimants through universal credit managed migration. [907657]

22. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps she has taken to improve the roll-out of universal credit. [907679]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): The regulations were laid before the House on 5 November, following consultation with the Social Security Advisory Committee. We are working with a wide range of stakeholders on processes to ensure that vulnerable claimants are moved smoothly on to universal credit.

Chris Philp: May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State on her well deserved return to the Front Bench? Croydon South is one of the constituencies with the highest level of universal credit roll-out, at 43%, and in general it is helping people back into work. There are, however, some technical anomalies relating to the timing of the assessment period as people come off work and into benefits or where they receive two salary payments in the same assessment period. Will the Secretary of State look into that particular anomaly and, if appropriate, make some small technical adjustments?

Amber Rudd: I have a number of matters that I will be looking into, having taken on this important new role. My hon. Friend raises an important point. I would point out to him that universal credit is successfully a dynamic assessment, so if somebody is paid twice during one month, the benefit payments will reflect that and then be adjusted the following month, but I am quite prepared to look at any issues he wants to bring me.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I am very glad that my right hon. Friend is back. Another thing to look into is the case of Emily Lydon, reported in The Sunday Times, because it is vital that the roll-out of universal credit is both measured and continually improved.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome. I share his view that it is vital that as universal credit is rolled out, we learn from any errors and adjust it, to ensure that it properly serves the people it is intended for. Of course I will look into that case—I saw the report—and, if appropriate, come back to him.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I welcome the Secretary of State to her position. I will ask her an easy question. The Government will bring forward regulations on the migration of beneficiaries of the existing benefits to universal credit. Will she not bring forward the debate on those regulations until we have received the Select Committee report and the Social Security Advisory Committee has had another chance to look at the Government’s important amendments?

Amber Rudd: I am not sure that the right hon. Gentleman has properly badged that as an easy question. I will have to take a look at that and come back to him, I am afraid.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In Hull, we have the amazing Welfare Rights service, which gives free and impartial advice to the people of Hull, but one of its concerns at the moment is a decision to move all universal support to the citizens advice bureau, which will take funding away from fantastic services such as Welfare Rights. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how giving the money to the CAB will have a negative unintended consequence on our wonderful Welfare Rights service in Hull?

Amber Rudd: I am very interested in responding to specific cases such as the one the hon. Lady raises. It is important that we provide the additional service. That is why we are working with Citizens Advice to provide a consistent service, but certainly she should come to the Department and meet either me or the Minister to discuss that.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend and neighbour back to the Front Bench, and I pay tribute to her predecessor, whom I enjoyed working for over many months. The Secretary of State will be well aware of Hastings Direct, a company that employs her constituents and mine. Will she pay credit to that company for holding a universal credit surgery with our jobcentre teams, which has helped people to find more access to benefits? One couple with a young child found that they were entitled to an extra £600 per month. Does that not show that universal credit works as a signpost, to help people into the benefits structure and increase their earnings?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for raising the important work that Hastings Direct has done. It is a really good example of a public-private
partnership making sure that the benefits of universal credit are set out for employers in an environment in which the employer and the employed can work closely together to get the best outcome.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place. Her predecessor suggested that a range of expert charities had welcomed the Chancellor’s intervention on universal credit, when in actual fact they wanted him to go further—much further. This new Secretary of State wields significant power, more than any of her five predecessors in the past three years, by virtue of the Prime Minister’s precarious position. Will she use that power to listen to those expert charities and halt universal credit until it is fixed?

Amber Rudd: I would not want to overstate what the hon. Gentleman calls my power, but I am certainly going to be listening very carefully. Part of the benefit of the universal credit roll-out will be making sure we get the expert guidance from the people who have been working in this field for many years, and we will certainly be doing that.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State on her return to the Government Front Bench.

The report of the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said, when asked about the problems that universal credit claimants are facing, that:

“Government ministers were…entirely dismissive”. Thus far, the Government have been determined to press ahead with the next phase of the roll-out, despite clear warnings from over 80 organisations working with disabled people who will be affected that many people could fall out of the social security system altogether and be in risk of destitution. Will the new Secretary of State end the Government’s state of denial, scrap the managed migration regulations and stop the roll-out of universal credit?

Amber Rudd: I have seen the report by the rapporteur—I read it over the weekend—and I must say that I was disappointed, to say the least, by the extraordinary political nature of his language. We on the Conservative Benches will always engage with professionals, experts and non-governmental organisations—we are not so proud that we do not think we can learn as we try to adjust universal credit for the benefit of everybody—but that sort of language was wholly inappropriate and actually discredited a lot of what he was saying. We look forward to working with experts in the area to make sure that we get the right outcome for the people whom we want to look after.

Care Leavers: Employment

4. John Howell (Henley) (Con): What recent steps has the Government taken to support care leavers into employment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): This Government are committed to supporting care leavers. We have introduced a £1,000 bursary to those starting an apprenticeship, extended paid internship opportunities across Government, launched a care leaver covenant and are upskilling our Jobcentre Plus staff.

John Howell: What work is the Minister doing with Barnardo’s, and what impact is the See Potential programme having?

Justin Tomlinson: I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who made it a personal priority of hers to introduce Barnardo’s not only to help train and improve the guidance for all of our frontline staff, but to offer a comprehensive work experience programme and opportunities for care leavers. This is a vital part of our See Potential work, as we unlock their undoubted potential.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What more can be done for constituents such as mine living in YMCA properties who are still going to college, yet cannot afford the bus fare or to feed themselves? That is exactly what has happened to a constituent of mine.

Justin Tomlinson: We are looking very carefully at all of the ways that we can make sure care leavers have the same opportunities that others take for granted. For example, through second chance learning, care leavers aged 18 to 22 are still able to access full benefits while having a second opportunity to learn. There is the £1,000 bursary for those who choose an apprenticeship, and the £2,000 bursary for those who choose higher education.

Universal Credit: Getting People into Work

5. Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What steps she is taking to measure progress on her Department’s objective of getting 200,000 more people into work through universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Under the universal credit business case, we expect universal credit to deliver an economic benefit of £8 billion a year in steady state, and result in 200,000 more people moving into work. We published a labour market evaluation strategy on 8 June, setting out how these impacts will be measured.

Layla Moran: I thank the Minister for his answer, but a recent Public Accounts Committee report on universal credit found that the Department, as it has in fact admitted, cannot empirically measure the number of people who are going back to work. I welcome the new Secretary of State to her place, but may I encourage her to read this report? How on earth, if the data are not reliable, can we meaningfully achieve any kind of target?

Alok Sharma: I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the document we have published about what we will be doing to measure this number. However, I also point her to the record levels of employment: the fact that there are more people in work in the economy right now than ever before, and that unemployment is at a 43-year
record low. Jobs are being created and people are moving into work, and that is largely due to the welfare reforms that we have introduced.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Will the Minister elaborate on how much better off families on universal credit are now as a result of measures introduced in the Budget?

**Alok Sharma:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. Earlier this year we introduced £1.5 billion of support, and in the Budget there was £4.5 billion of support. I say to Opposition Members that it is all very well calling for support, but they also have to vote for these measures, which they never actually do.

**Yvette Cooper** (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister knows that there are huge problems with the roll-out of universal credit in terms of debt, hardship and rent arrears. The new Secretary of State, whom I congratulate on her new post, needs to take time to look at those problems and address the severe poverty that is being caused, not to dismiss the UN report. I urge her and all the Work and Pensions Ministers to halt the roll-out. It will hit my constituency at the end of this month, and frankly, people are deeply worried that we are going to see delays, debt and hardship at Christmas. I urge Ministers: halt this roll-out now.

**Alok Sharma:** I hope that the right hon. Lady would also recognise that there is 1 million fewer people living in absolute poverty now than in 2010, when she was in government. If she is concerned about her constituents, I would be happy to talk to her and her local jobcentre to provide them with the assurances that they need.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The target is getting 200,000 extra people into work through universal credit. How many have been delivered so far?

**Alok Sharma:** Since the hon. Gentleman is keen to talk about the number of people in work, I point him to the universal credit claimant survey, which we published in June. It showed that under universal credit, employment levels almost double between the point of the claim and nine months into it.

**Pensions Dashboard**

6. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to support industry to deliver the pensions dashboard.

**Sarah Newton** (Somerset West and Devizes) (Con): The pensions dashboard is the great leap forward for the pensions industry, and the Government are 100% behind it. We have consulted the industry at length and will publish our feasibility study very shortly.

**Kevin Foster:** I thank the Minister for his answer. The pensions dashboard will be a welcome addition to the information available to Torbay residents about their retirement plans. What work will the Government do, though, to ensure that pension schemes relating to employers of all sizes are included?

**Guy Opperman** (Torbay): In Torbay, 7,000 people now have the benefit of an auto-enrolled pension. We want to ensure that my hon. Friend’s constituents have online access to as much of their retirement savings in one place as is humanly possible through the pensions dashboard, and that is what we are going to do.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Many of my constituents contacted me to express concern that the Government were going to scrap the pensions dashboard. I welcome the Minister’s 100% commitment, but can he tell us exactly when it is going to be delivered?

**Guy Opperman:** The hon. Gentleman will understand that a feasibility study and consultation are pending, but I will be happy to discuss the dashboard with him in more detail if he will bear with me. There is no question but that the thousands of people in his constituency who have had the benefit of auto-enrolment, and the many thousands of employers supporting those employees, will be benefiting from the process.

**Budget 2018: Disabled People**

7. **Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to support disabled people in Budget 2018.

19. **James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to support disabled people in Budget 2018.

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work** (Sarah Newton): In the Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a £1,000 a year increase in the work allowances under universal credit, which will provide a £630 boost to working disabled people and families on low incomes. That is in addition to the additional support for claimants in receipt of severe disability premium announced in June.

**Mr Streeter:** I thank my hon. Friend for her reply. Will she join me in welcoming the success of the Disability Confident programme, which many employers in both the private and public sectors are embracing with enthusiasm? Is it making a difference to the number of disabled people who are in employment?

**Sarah Newton:** I am delighted to echo my hon. Friend’s words. We are determined that every disabled person has the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and Disability Confident has helped many employers recruit and retain talented disabled people. The latest data indicates that there are now 3.9 million disabled people in work, which is an increase of 973,000 since 2013.

**James Heappey:** Somerset’s economy is characterised by tens of thousands of small businesses and start-ups. How many start-up loans have been granted to people with disabilities, and what steps is the Department taking to help to ensure that those with disabilities across the Wells constituency have the support that they need to start their own small business?

**Sarah Newton:** That is an excellent question. The new enterprise allowance supports people to set up a business, and a quarter of the 220,000 new entrepreneurs have a self-declared disability. The personal support package,
the Work and Health programme and Access to Work all support self-employed disabled people. A record 33,860 people were supported through Access to Work this year, an increase of 13% on last year.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): That may be so, but the charity Scope reports that the disability employment gap has remained stubbornly at 30% for about a decade. Will the Minister make a bold commitment to disabled people up and down the country and reinstate the previous target of halving the disability employment gap?

Sarah Newton: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will, like Scope, welcome data published last week by the Office for National Statistics showing that, for the first time since records were kept, there are more disabled people in work than out of work. We are utterly determined to close that unemployment gap to make sure that the whole nation draws on all the talents of disabled people.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Department for Work and Pensions was due to bring forward regulations to protect the severe disability premium. Can the Minister tell the House when we expect to see them published?

Sarah Newton: A very good question. The regulations will be published before Christmas, and I hope that everyone in the House will vote for them so that people on the severe disability premium will have that protected in universal credit.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The DWP has repeatedly ignored evidence of the devastating impact of cuts to social security on disabled people. The UN report into extreme poverty found that “compassion...has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and...callous approach” to social security. The Government have a history of dismissing UN recommendations on disabled people, but the Department now has a chance to end that. Will the Minister finally listen and accept the conclusions of the most recent UN report?

Sarah Newton: We are putting in place record levels of funding to support people with disabilities. In every single year of this Government we increase our expenditure for people with disabilities. I published a very full response to the previous UN report, and I utterly repudiate the conclusion that this country does not support disabled people. I am determined to make sure that every disabled person in our country has the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Marsha De Cordova: The UN report condemned the Government’s sanctions regime as “debilitating”, “draconian”, “harsh” and “arbitrary”, and urged the Government to conduct an independent review, yet Ministers recently admitted that they broke their promise and failed to carry out such a review. Has the Department learnt its lessons about creating a hostile environment, and will the Minister commit to carrying out an independent review of sanctions and conditionality on disabled people?

Sarah Newton: The benefit system is there to provide personalised and tailored support for its recipients. There were factual errors in the reporting by the UN rapporteur. For example, on mandatory reconsiderations, he absolutely denied the fact that decisions were overturned, yet 19% of mandatory reconsiderations found in favour of disabled people. We have undertaken a huge number of independent reviews of our benefit system and we do not hesitate in making improvements when they are identified.

Universal Credit Roll-out: Personal Finances

8. Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What recent assessment her Department has made of the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on the personal finances of claimants.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Universal credit allows claimants to work and earn more, and the evidence is that people on universal credit are moving into work faster. We believe that everyone who can work should be given every support to get into work. That is what the job coaches are doing.

Julie Elliott: The Child Poverty Action Group found that almost half of those moving on to universal credit needed support, which is often not available, to set up their claim. If they miss their deadline, they receive no transitional protection and no back-dated credit, and they have to wait a further five weeks for payment. With the new Secretary of State leading the Department, is it not time for the Government to pause the roll-out of this benefit and look again at wiping out these very, very serious wrongs in the system?

Guy Opperman: If the individual claimant is vulnerable, there can be backdating, but for those who need extra support, there are advances of 100% from day one and also budgeting support. We are creating a brand new partnership with Citizens Advice to deliver a better universal support service.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): New figures confirm that one in five jobs in London is now low-paid—below the London living wage. That is the highest proportion there has ever been, so working people are also in poverty and need the protection of universal credit, yet the qualifying period is casting many families into very severe hardship. What action will the Minister take to deal with that problem so that people can understand that work will pay, rather than casting them further into hardship?

Guy Opperman: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government introduced the living wage, which is enhanced annually, and that we raised the tax threshold, which assisted individuals. She will also be aware that there is child support for education and that we are freezing fuel duty. All these cost-of-living measures have been of assistance to local people.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The UN’s damaging report highlights Wales as having the worst poverty rate in the UK, but because social security powers are not devolved to Wales, the Welsh Government are scarcely able to replicate the Scottish Government’s excellent work in alleviating Westminster-driven poverty. Will the Minister commit to stopping the roll-out in Wales until the present problems are resolved and propose the devolution of universal credit powers to enable our country’s Government to reduce poverty and suffering?
Guy Opperman: My understanding is that 46 out of 59 offices in Wales have now rolled out the full UC service. The hon Lady will be aware that household incomes have never been higher and that 1 million fewer people are living in absolute poverty compared with in 2010, including 300,000 children.

Universal Credit Managed Migration

9. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to identify people on legacy benefits with high support needs who will be required to transfer to universal credit managed migration.

10. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the effect of universal credit on trends in the level of rent arrears.

Justin Tomlinson: No, because these migrations will bring in very important additional supports, as each and every Member needs to bear in mind when the vote comes forward. We work closely with stakeholders, and I remind Opposition Members that under legacy benefits, more than 700,000 people, who include some of the most vulnerable claimants—the people who contact us as constituency MPs—are, on average, missing out on £285 a month because those legacy benefits are complex and not personalised. It is absolutely right that we do this, but in a controlled and sensible manner.

Universal Credit: Rent Arrears

Justin Tomlinson: The key to universal credit is that, for the first time, a claimant will get personalised, tailored support that can help them navigate all the forms of support available. Under legacy benefits, more than 700,000 people, among whom are some of the most vulnerable people, miss out on an average of £285 a month. Those on universal credit will typically spend 50% longer looking for work. This is key to unlocking the potential of all claimants to improve their life chances.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thune housing association in my constituency tells me that errors in universal credit, such as the system retaining the wrong landlord details despite the claimant having
asked for that to be corrected, have meant that some tenants have ended up two months in arrears through no fault of their own. What will the Minister do to fix the system before people end up in debt as a result?

Justin Tomlinson: I am very sorry to hear of that. If there are specific cases, please do not hesitate to highlight them. Through the roll-out of the landlord portal, which has been warmly welcomed by social housing companies and local authorities, there is an opportunity for claimants and housing bodies to work together to manage this migration process smoothly.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister knows that the five-week delay under universal credit forces people into debt right at the start of their claim, which too often leads to rent arrears and other hardships. I welcome the new Secretary of State to her post. Will the Minister encourage her to take a fresh look at this indefensible five-week delay in particular?

Justin Tomlinson: As we have pointed out, those transitioning from legacy benefits will get the additional two weeks of housing benefit and, with the new measures announced, two weeks of either their employment and support allowance, their jobseeker’s allowance or their income support, as well as access to advance payments from day one. The key thing is that this system mirrors the world of work. For the vast majority of people, their aim is to get into work, and in work they would expect to be paid in arrears. They would have to deal with that at the same time as going back into work, whereas now the personalised work coach can provide support by giving them access to advance benefits and pointing them to the support offered by Citizens Advice and our wider universal credit support network. It is about providing that support as people prepare themselves for the world of work.

PIP and Universal Credit: Tribunal Appeals

12. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What proportion of tribunal appeals for (a) personal independence payment and (b) universal credit have been successful in 2018; and what assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of those appeals having been successful.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): In the first six months of 2018, 71% of PIP decisions and 51% of UC decisions heard and decided at appeal were revised. For context, of the 3.5 million PIP decisions made to date, 9% of all decisions have been appealed and 4% have been successfully appealed. We remain utterly committed to ensuring that we get decisions right first time and reduce the number of appeals.

Toby Perkins: The Minister may be committed to reducing the number of appeals, but the statistics she has just revealed show how awfully the system is working for many of the most vulnerable in our society. As she says, 71% of appeals are successful. That is putting a huge financial strain on the system but, more importantly, some of the most vulnerable are going through incredibly stressful processes. Will the new Secretary of State work with the Minister to improve the system so that the people who come into our surgeries every single week and tell us how awful the system is can stop going through the process as they are currently having to?

Sarah Newton: I am sure that I will have the support of the Secretary of State in continuing our comprehensive plan for improving PIP. However, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that, according to the most recent data from the Ministry of Justice, there has been a 15% decline in the number of appeals, and the customer satisfaction rating for PIP has risen from 76% to 87%. I have always said that one person’s poor experience is one too many, but we will continue to do everything that we can to get it right first time.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): If 9% of PIP decisions are being appealed against, does that mean that more than nine out of 10 people do not appeal against theirs because they do not wish to challenge them? Will the introduction of video recording improve that rate so that there is even more confidence that the decisions are right?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As I have said, the customer satisfaction ratings are high, and the assessments themselves consistently meet our quality target, which is over 90%. I am pleased to say, however, that our plans for the video recording of the assessments are going very well, and the live testing trial will start later this month.

Workplace Pensions

13. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What estimate the Government have made of the number of people paying into workplace pensions.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Nearly 10 million people are enrolled in a workplace pension thanks to the success of automatic enrolment. In the Crawley constituency, approximately 48,000 eligible jobholders have been automatically enrolled, and thanks are due to the 1,600 employers who have fulfilled their duties locally.

Henry Smith: Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Crawley-headquartered B&CE and its People’s Pension for playing such an important role in that roll-out of pensions?

Guy Opperman: It was a delight to visit The People’s Pension with my hon. Friend, to see the hundreds of local staff who are doing such a fantastic job and the work that the company is doing as a great local employer, to receive a Crawley Town football shirt—I must confess that I have not yet worn it—and to support a great local business.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Auto-enrolment was a landmark achievement, a creation of the last Labour Government. I welcome the progress that has been made, but does the Minister agree that the threshold is too high—37% of female workers, 33% of workers with a disability, and 28% of black, Asian and
Guy Opperman: I think that the hon. Gentleman will accept that while auto-enrolment has been a cross-party success story, it was this Government who actually introduced it. The issue that he raises was comprehensively addressed by the 2017 auto-enrolment review, which was conducted by three independent support organisations, and the key points that he raises are being addressed in the current AE review.

Budget 2018: People in Work

14. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps the Government have taken in Budget 2018 to ensure that people in work keep more of what they earn when in receipt of universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): In the Budget, the Chancellor announced a £1,000-a-year increase in work allowances from April next year. It will provide an annual boost of £630 for about 2.4 million working families across the country.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend welcome those announcements in the Budget? Does he agree that not all Labour’s legacies were as effective as those mentioned in the previous question, and that a system which penalised hard-working people with marginal tax rates as high as 90% was not effective?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Under the legacy benefits system, some people faced punitive marginal tax rates. The fixed taper rate under universal credit ensures that work always pays, and that is why we are seeing more people getting into work.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Work does not always pay—that is the problem. A million more children whose parents are working in poverty, and a million and a half people are relying on food banks. Why do the Government not implement Labour’s plan for a £10 minimum wage and ensure that work truly always pay—that is the problem. A million more children living in workless households are five times more likely to be living in poverty than those in households in which the adults work.

Job Creation since 2010

15. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What estimate the Government have made of the number of jobs created since 2010.

Sarah Newton: The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Employment has increased by more than 3.3 million people since 2010 to a record high of 32.4 million. This is on average 1,000 more people in work every day under this Government. In the recent Budget, the Chancellor was able to confirm that our economy is growing strongly and that we will see increases in opportunities for people to be able to work.

Sir Edward Leigh: Surely it is not enough for us to stress the record number of new jobs created; we have to convince people that these are real jobs, with workers’ rights being protected, and above all we have to convince people that the pay of indigenous workers is not being undercut by mass immigration.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that it is really important that we want to build on our strong record of protecting and enhancing employment rights. We are determined to grow full-time high-quality jobs, and that is just what we are doing. The latest labour market statistics show that the number of full-time jobs is up 82,000 on the quarter, up 416,000 on the year and up almost 2.7 million since 2010. That is a record high. The statistics also show that average earnings are rising in real terms.

Michael Tomlinson: Notwithstanding the previous question, this country remains the jobs factory of Europe, creating more jobs than almost 12 other nations combined. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the youth employment figures and tell us how they compare with those of our European allies and neighbours?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend makes an important point. This is the future of our country. I am proud to say that the overall level of youth unemployment in the UK has nearly halved since 2010. Our youth unemployment rate is lower than that of France, Spain and Italy. The UK youth unemployment rate is 5.8 percentage points below that of the euro area, and 3.9 percentage points below that of the EU28 average.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): As the Minister knows, many of the jobs created since 2010 are low paid and insecure, and the number of people in in-work poverty has risen. Will she therefore tell us what assessment her Department has made of the increase in the use of loan sharks and other illegal money lenders?

Sarah Newton: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is just factually incorrect. The vast majority of jobs have been full-time, well-paid jobs. I have the honour of representing my home, the area where I grew up, and I can tell her that I have seen at first hand the growth of full-time, well-paid jobs all around my constituency since 2010. That is what this Government are delivering all over the country.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): We have seen an exponential increase in underemployment since 2010, through the growth of part-time jobs and...
zero-hours contracts. Does the Minister therefore agree that what we have actually seen is a jobs mirage rather than a jobs miracle?

Sarah Newton: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is just factually incorrect. We have seen the growth of many full-time jobs, and the number of zero-hours contracts is going down. Speaking as a woman who raised her family, I can tell him that part-time employment can be an extremely good option for many people in our labour market.

Welfare System: Moving into Work/Extending Working Hours

16. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps is she taking to ensure that the welfare system rewards people (a) moving into work and (b) extending their working hours.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I want to start by thanking my right hon. Friend for the engagement and support that she gives to her local jobcentre. As I have noted, we recently announced in the Budget a £1,000 increase in work allowances. We also have the single taper to ensure that claimants are better off working, and working more. Evidence also shows an increase in earnings for those in work and on universal credit by an average of £600 a year.

Theresa Villiers: Can the Minister confirm that claimants on universal credit are more likely to move into work and more likely to make progress towards longer hours in work under this system, compared with the old system that we inherited from Labour?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Under the legacy benefits system, around 1.4 million people spent almost a decade trapped on benefits instead of being helped into work, and much of that time was under the last Labour Government. Under universal credit, people get into work faster, they stay in work longer and, very importantly, they earn more.

18. [907675] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I say to Government Front Benchers that Christmas is coming and the goose is not going to get very fat for many of our constituents? The new Secretary of State lives in a more normal constituency than the Chancellor or the Prime Minister. Will she think about Christmas and what universal credit is doing to so many of her constituents and mine?

Alok Sharma: As we have pointed out, under universal credit people are able to get the one-to-one support with their work coach that was not possible under the legacy benefits system. Again, I reach out to the hon. Gentleman. If he has concerns in his own constituency, I am very happy to have a discussion with him and his local jobcentre, because we want to support absolutely every single person who is in the welfare system.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The welfare system undoubtedly encourages our constituents into work and rewards them in work, but the system does not always capture that because of the anomaly of the claimant count being used as a proxy for unemployment, whereas in fact many people who are on universal credit are working. What can the Minister do to try to improve the statistical way in which this is recorded?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important question. As he will know, we had a consultation on this particular point. We have published our findings, and I would be very happy to share those with him. Perhaps it would be appropriate for me to write to all colleagues setting out the changes that we are proposing.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not obvious how few questions we have had from Conservative Members today on some of the biggest changes to welfare reform in a generation? I have raised with Ministers many times now the fact that those who are getting a change of circumstance as they move on to universal credit do not have the transitional protections at the moment. Ministers keep telling me that they do, but they do not. I have had universal credit in my constituency for a long time, and I could give them a catalogue of cases where people are worse off on universal credit as a result of this. With the new leadership at the Department, can the tin ear now be opened a little?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Lady is keen on protecting people who move from legacy benefits on to universal credit under the managed migration process, I would invite her to vote for the regulations, with me and my colleagues, when they come through Parliament later this year.

Universal Credit: Lone Parents

21. Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What assessment has she made of the effect of universal credit on lone parents.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Lone parents are the primary beneficiaries of the Government’s decision to increase the help provided for childcare from 70% to 85%, which will help us to enhance the record levels of lone parent employment in this country.

Alison McGovern: The whole House will be aware that lone parent employment increased radically under the last Labour Government, but unfortunately lone parents now face being worse off because of universal credit. So can the new Secretary of State and her ministerial team guarantee that as part of their review they will make sure that no lone parent family in this country is worse off because of universal credit?

Justin Tomlinson: The lone parent employment rate is now at 67.6%, which is a record high and something this Government are very proud of. We will continue to try to push to see that figure go up further. We have made announcements on increasing the national living wage, which has seen a real-terms increase of 8% over the past three years, and changes to the income tax threshold worth £1,200, while the national living wage in itself, for somebody working full-time, is worth £2,000. That is making sure that lone parents who are working are getting the support to have more money available at the end of every month.

Topical Questions

T1. 907680 Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): Three days in, and I know that the Department for Work and Pensions is a force for good. It helps people in need, helps people into work and out of poverty, and gives support at the end of their lives. This is what we want for our families, our friends and our neighbours. This is the country we are; this is who we are. It is good that employment has risen to record levels of 75%, as stated just recently.

But I know that there are problems with universal credit, despite its good intentions. I have seen them for myself. I will be listening and learning from the expert groups in this area that do such good work. I know it can be better. I will make it my role to ensure that we deliver that through our discussions within the DWP and through discussions with the Treasury. We will have a fair, compassionate and efficient benefits system.

Liz McInnes: I thank the new Secretary of State for that response and add my congratulations to her on her return to the Front Bench. In her new role, will she, unlike her predecessor who was described by the UN rapporteur as “almost entirely dismissive of criticisms of welfare changes and universal credit,” take seriously his report on poverty in the UK and heed his calls for changes to the universal credit system?

Amber Rudd: The rapporteur does no credit to his report by making personal comments about the former Secretary of State in this Department, who did a fantastic job. Having said that, I have already acknowledged that we can make changes to the UC system: despite the tremendous good that it does, I know that there are problems with it and we will be focusing on fixing them.

T3. 907682 Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): A constituent of mine who is currently claiming the personal independence payment has been told that she will need to undergo reassessment just one month before she is migrated on to the state pension. She is concerned that this will cost more than the amount she will get for that extra month; is this process correct, and what will happen when she gets her state pension?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I thank my hon. Friend for asking that really good question. People who qualify for PIP before retirement age are able then to carry on claiming PIP, so long as they are eligible, into retirement. That is in addition to pension or any other benefits to which they are entitled.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said in his report that the rising level of child poverty is not just a disgrace but is a “social calamity and an economic disaster”, and that Government policies are locking millions of children “into a cycle of poverty from which most will have great difficulty escaping.”

According to Joseph Rowntree Foundation research published today, the current freeze on working-age benefits is the single biggest driver behind rising child poverty levels. Will the new Secretary of State end the benefits freeze and make tackling child poverty the priority it should be once again?

Amber Rudd: Of course, tackling all poverty is a priority for the Department for Work and Pensions, and we know that the best way out of poverty is to make sure people get into work. But more than that, we know that a strong economy will deliver the higher paid jobs, and that is what this Government are going to focus on, and we will listen and engage with non-governmental organisations and others to make sure we can deliver that.

T6. 907683 Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): May I also say how nice it is to see the Secretary of State back on the Front Bench? Will she look at improving access to universal credit for those leaving prison, so that those who have left prison will not face delays in getting money in their pocket and thus be driven back into a cycle of crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): My hon. Friend is being very active in this area, and it is a key priority for us that access to support is available from day one. We have 137 work coaches in prisons to help prepare for UC claims, and we now have three pilots—in Norwich, Wayland and Belmarsh prisons—to make sure we can test the difference that completing UC claims will make. This is a real priority.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We have always known that austerity is a political choice, but now, thanks to Philip Alston, we know that poverty is also this Government’s political choice as we consider his findings into areas like the near-£5 billion benefit freeze cut next year, the 1950s women who have been impoverished by pension changes, and targeting children with austerity via the two-child limit. What different choices can we expect from this new Secretary of State?

Amber Rudd: I have to say that I think the hon. Gentleman’s comments are outrageous. It is in no way our intention to do any of the things he set out in that way. The purpose of this Department—[Interruption.] It is what the hon. Gentleman said, and I think I have made my views on the UN rapporteur absolutely clear. The hon. Gentleman need only listen to what we are saying and actually look at the evidence—look at the evidence of people getting back into work, of people getting higher paid jobs. The political choice that we are making on the Government Benches is for a stronger economy to deliver the jobs that are wanted by his constituents and mine.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): May I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post and suggest she pays attention to what the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said a bit earlier, because that is very important in terms of cash flow and the position facing people coming on to universal credit? The Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), made
some welcome points in response to that question, but we need to build on that for the future and also build on the work my right hon. Friend's predecessor did in this respect.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and he is absolutely right: I am well aware of the need to ensure that people have access to those cash benefits as soon as possible. We have already made some adjustments to that, and I will do all I can to ensure that we do better.

T5. [907664] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My constituent Natalie Tingle works hard in her job and as a student, but is £400 a month worse off after switching to universal credit and losing child tax credit. She now gets just £12 a month, as her student loan is counted as income, and she is getting into debt. Will the Minister investigate her circumstances and find a way to help?

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and discuss that particular case.

T9. [907668] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am very grateful to Crawley DWP staff, who successfully helped with the transition to universal credit in June. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the support available to claimants who are transferring?

Amber Rudd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his work with the jobcentre in Crawley to ensure that claimants get the best benefits. We have had some changes from the Budget, as he will be aware, and will bring forward more details of regulations to help to deliver those outcomes as soon as possible.

T8. [907677] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I also welcome the Secretary of State to her post on the Front Bench? In the past I have mentioned the problem of the lack of online access in the remotest parts of my constituency, but in addition there is the problem of people in my constituency who cannot, as we say in the highlands, work a computer. They do not have the skills. What is going to be done to address that issue?

Amber Rudd: Yes, it is a very important point and one that we are well aware of. We cannot assume that everybody can, as the hon. Gentleman puts it, work a computer. We have made provision in the arrangements to ensure that people can have access and that job coaches can work with people remotely via telephone and also engage in their communities, perhaps in different places from the jobcentre. However, I will keep a careful eye on this issue to ensure that we are delivering a truly comprehensive service, so that everybody, whether they can work a computer or not, can access it.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): May I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to her position and wish her every success? She will know that youth unemployment has fallen by half since 2010, so does she agree that ours is the party of opportunity and the party for young people?

Amber Rudd: Let me take the opportunity again to thank my right hon. Friend for the extraordinary work that she did in this Department, particularly on the Disability Confident campaign, but also on encouraging women into work. She is a particular champion of women and social mobility, so yes, I agree with her: it is this party that is the party of opportunity.

T10. [907689] Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I have received a letter from a constituent who is a universal credit caseworker. She describes overworked staff looking after so many cases that people receive payments only when they complain. Will the Minister respond to this whistleblower’s allegation of chaos?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Gentleman has a particular case to raise, I am happy to discuss it, but I should say that I and my colleagues go up and down the country to jobcentres, and I am afraid that the characterisation that he described is not the one we find. We find work coaches who are really enthusiastic about delivering universal credit and supporting people on a one-to-one basis. When it comes to payments, 80% of people get their full payment on time for the first assessment period and 90% will be receiving at least part-payment, but of course we require information to be provided to us—for instance about childcare or other costs—before we can make those payments.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I have sat here patiently through questions, and there have been lots of congratulations from across the House, particularly to the Secretary of State and the previous Secretary of State, quite rightly, but the people who should be congratulated are those in jobcentres and those who have got the jobs. In my constituency of Hemel Hempstead, which is a new town—it is 70 years old, but we are a new town—we have the lowest unemployment ever. In 2010 it was 2,460; it is now 820. Those people should be congratulated.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for pointing out the real benefits seen over the past few years and how important it is that the system helps individuals into work. It is the people who have got the new jobs who need the congratulations, but also the work coaches, who for the first time provide a personal service to ensure that every individual is helped into work.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Professor Philip Alston talks about things that those of us who choose to see them see in our constituencies every time we are back there. The new Secretary of State comes into a Department where her Ministers are on autopilot, denying the real, lived experiences of my constituents. Instead of showing the signs of Stockholm syndrome, why does she not give us a break from the past and not misrepresent reports, but actually listen to the UN special rapporteur?

Amber Rudd: The fact that I think that the UN rapporteur’s report is wrong does not mean that we do not listen to other reports and experts in the area. The hon. Gentleman does not seem interested in the facts surrounding the success of the scheme. We can hold these two things in our heads: overall, UC is being successful and work is at record levels—these are good
things—while also acknowledging that there are not insignificant areas that need changing and addressing. We can do both those things.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): In Morecambe, we have had universal credit for the past two years; we were one of the very first places where it was rolled out. It is a success. I congratulate my right hon. Friend on going from the Back Benches to the Front Bench again, and I invite her to Morecambe to see Gary Knowles and his fantastic team, to hear from them at first hand how they are making universal credit a success in Morecambe.

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation, and I would be delighted to take him up on it. I encourage all colleagues from across the House to take the opportunity, if they have not done so yet, to go into jobcentres and speak to the work coaches, who will show them how the system works and how this personal approach is so different from what has happened in the past and so much more constructive for individuals.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) has perambulated within the Chamber, but there is no dishonour in that.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): In advance of the imminent urgent question, I want to say that universal credit is due to be imposed on the north of my constituency just before Christmas. I wrote to the Secretary of State’s predecessor twice asking for it to be delayed, if only until the new year. Will the new Secretary of State please look favourably on this request?

Amber Rudd: We are not stopping, ceasing or pausing the system, but we always make sure that we change it where it needs to be changed, to ensure that it operates in people’s best interests.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am delighted to welcome the new Secretary of State to her place, and I thank the old Secretary of State—[Hon. Members: “Former!”] My apologies—I thank the former Secretary of State for all she did, not least in acquiring the additional money for universal credit. I am delighted to say that we now have record disability employment in this country. Will the Minister confirm that the Department will continue to work on giving assistive technology to disabled people to help them to find work?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that question about a really important matter. It is great to see the use of the tech fund in access to work. We are always working on this, and on Wednesday we should have a really good announcement to make on expenditure through the challenge fund, which will enable even further use of technology to support people into work.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In congratulating the new Secretary of State, may I commend to her the “Panorama” programme that was filmed in my constituency last week? It showed chaos in the universal credit system, poverty and people being evicted, as well as landlords not accepting that the system worked in their interest. Will she watch that programme and report to me on its contents?

Amber Rudd: I am always grateful for suggestions of programmes to watch. I will try to do so, but I cannot promise to report to the right hon. Gentleman, as he requires.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Youth unemployment is at record lows; more women are in work; and we have the lowest unemployment rate in this country since the 1970s, with unemployment down by more than half from 2010 in Corby and east Northamptonshire. What role does my right hon. Friend believe universal credit has played specifically in delivering that success?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding the House of the tremendous benefits of universal credit and the tremendous advantages of an economy that is growing and providing so much new work for our constituents. Yes, of course universal credit has an important part to play in delivering those advances.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): In March, I wrote to the DWP regarding a systematic error in the housing element of universal credit that was incorrectly deducting £70 from claims. I was assured that the fault was known and the fix was on its way, but eight months later my constituents are still having their money taken. When will the Government sort out this mess?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Lady would like to have a discussion about this case, I will of course look into it. Quite a lot of the time, I find that when Opposition colleagues raise issues, they do not always follow up with the individual cases. I hope that on this occasion, she will do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues, not for the first time and assuredly, I predict, not for the last. Demand massively outstrips supply, but time is our enemy and we must now move on.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The point of order will come after the urgent question. [Interruption.] I hope that it is not a point of argument or of advocacy, but a point of order requiring an authoritative ruling from the Chair. I am sure the hon. Lady is an honest seeker after truth.

Debbie Abrahams: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Although I was very disappointed with the dismissive response from the Secretary of State and Ministers to the UN rapporteur’s report on poverty in the UK, it was nothing compared with the remarks made by the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on “The Andrew Marr Show” yesterday in response to a question regarding the report and the dire circumstances faced by Emily Lydon. Emily is brain damaged, following her mother contracting Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease when she was pregnant. She is being forced to sell her home as a result of transferring on to universal credit. The hon. Gentleman absolutely dismissed her plight, and he brought
shame not only on the Government, but on this House by the type of remarks he made. Have you had any indication that he will be making an apology to Emily and to this House? If not, how can I take this further?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is: no, I have received no such indication of any plan on the part of the Minister or any other Minister to make a statement on that matter. However, the hon. Lady, using the parliamentary guile she has nurtured over a period of years in this place, has registered, with some force, her—and possibly others’—concerns, to which I feel sure, through parliamentary means, she will return before long. If there are no further points of order flowing from questions, or purporting to flow from questions, we come now to the urgent question.
Johnston Press: Administration

3.41 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the impact of Johnston Press going into administration.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): As the House will know, on Friday Johnston Press confirmed that it was going into administration. Johnston Press has debts of £220 million that were due to be repaid in June next year. It operates, as the House knows, titles at local, regional and national levels. It has explored a range of refinancing options over the past 18 months, including a debt-for-equity swap with bondholders. In October, it entered into a formal sales process, but no suitable buyer was found. On Saturday, it was announced that the newspapers and assets owned by Johnston Press would be acquired by JPI Media, a new consortium established of Johnston Press creditors. JPI Media has said that the operation of the newspapers and websites will continue. It has also said that the debt will be reduced to £85 million, repayable by the end of 2023, and that it will be injecting £35 million into the company to help it operate, including supporting the transition to digital. It has also released a statement saying that the situation will have an impact on employees, and pension holders on the defined pension scheme, and that it is working through what this will mean for about 250 current members of staff who are impacted. The Pension Protection Fund has been notified. As the House knows, this is a fund set up by the Government to provide pension benefits to members of defined-benefit schemes whose sponsoring employers have become insolvent. The PPF, with the assistance of the trustees of the scheme, will assess whether the scheme needs to enter the PPF.

Over the weekend, I spoke to David King, formerly the chief executive of Johnston Press and now the chief executive of JPI Media, and today I spoke to its head director. They set out that they believed this move was the best course of action for the long-term future of their staff and titles and that the only alternative would have been liquidation and redundancies. Like Members from across the House, I am committed to a vibrant and free press. Johnston Press, with more than 200 titles and 2,000 staff serving communities across the UK, plays a significant part in that—three of these titles serve my constituency. Its future sustainability is therefore very important to us all.

My deepest sympathies are with anyone who is facing uncertainty as a result of the changes. However, it is important to note that the takeover may come under the rules as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. Under that legislation, where it appears that a relevant merger or takeover situation arises, the Secretary of State can consider, in a quasi-judicial capacity, whether it raises media public-interest considerations. As such, I am sure that the House will understand that at this stage I will not set out any views on the impact of this specific transaction.

What is clear is that this is an example of the challenges faced by the newspaper industry more broadly and in particular of the challenges faced by local papers. Such papers help to bring together local voices and shine a light on important local issues, in communities, courtrooms and council chambers. It is clear, though, that such papers have to make difficult decisions to try to adapt to the changing market. At this challenging time for print journalism, we are working hard to ensure its sustainability. In March, we launched an independent review, chaired by Dame Frances Cairncross. It will look into how the production and distribution of high-quality journalism can be sustained in a changing market, with a particular focus on the online space. Dame Frances’s report and recommendations will be published early next year. Next week, the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries will host an open session with Dame Frances, so that Members of this House and of the other place can share their views on these important issues.

At national and local levels, a press that can hold the powerful to account remains an essential component of our democracy. That is what this Government are working to support.

Tom Watson: I, too, spoke to David King this weekend. Like many right hon. and hon. Members from Government and Opposition parties, I was alarmed at the plans for Johnston Press to go into administration. This centuries-old British company has more than 200 newspapers that report vital local, regional and national news and hold the powerful to account. Although, as the Secretary of State says, the buy-out by JPI seems to have averted the imminent closure of those publications, their long-term future, and that of hundreds of jobs, is far from certain.

This is part of a bigger, long-term global strategic question: in this digital age of information abundance, how can local democracy be preserved through quality local journalism? Since 2005, 200 local newspapers have closed and we have lost half all local journalists. For 10 years, we have seen the impact of digital disruption on local journalism. After eight years of the current Administration, all we hear is the Secretary of State referring to a process that they currently articulate as the Cairncross review.

Whilst Ministers prevaricate and hold open sessions, the tech oligopolies have consolidated their media advantage by dominating digital ad revenues. They continue to avoid fair taxes and will pay less once the Government’s corporation tax cuts are introduced under the Finance Bill. Some have even allowed criminal data breaches on their platforms. Worse still, they sneer at Parliaments around the world that try to hold them to account. I remind the House again that even Rupert Murdoch showed greater respect for our democratic institutions than Mark Zuckerberg, who refused to appear before our Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Specifically on the Johnston Press, which is a victim of the long-term strategic changes in the media market that the Secretary of State’s colleagues, including the Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who is chuntering from a sedentary position, seem to think are funny—

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): indicated dissent.

Tom Watson: Or the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), sitting next to him, then.
Will the Secretary of State confirm that no one currently on a pension from Johnston Press will receive a shortfall in payments? Will the Government step in if they are going to? Will the pension regulator assess what obligation the new entity has to those employees set to lose out?

I understand that JPI Media was apparently established back in September. When was the Secretary of State made aware of that, because, clearly, the writing was on the wall for Johnston Press when the new entity was established, and what meetings has he or his ministerial team had since the creation of JPI Media, to protect the interests of Johnston Press workers?

There is a crisis in local newspapers that we have known about for many years and that, whatever our politics, it is all our civic duties to address. The Secretary of State has been in post for only 134 days. In that time, he has overseen the resignation of a respected Minister, made an obvious and humiliating policy climbdown on what he has overseen the resignation of a respected Minister, made an obvious and humiliating policy climbdown on fixed odds betting terminals, while ignoring what everyone knew would be the inevitable crisis in local news. He should have given a statement to the House today, not been dragged here to give a woeful answer in an urgent question. After 134 days in post, he needs to wake up and stop sleeping on the job.

Jeremy Wright: Let me start by agreeing with the hon. Gentleman that this is indeed a long-term problem that requires some long-term solutions. As he rightly says, local papers have been closing since 2005; but, if my memory serves me correctly, it was not my party in government in 2005; it was his. It really will not do for him to bring what is a serious issue—and a long-term one, as he says—to this House and try to make it into a bit of political point scoring against the current Secretary of State. I do not mind, but those who are affected by these changes will want to hear something a little more constructive from him and the Labour party.

Let me answer the pensions question. The hon. Gentleman asks me about current pensioners. As far as I understand it, they will not be affected. Anyone in receipt of their pension now will continue to be paid. The changes will affect those who are currently in employment, and we believe that there are 250 or so in total.

The next point that the hon. Gentleman makes is that this problem was apparent for some time. He is right, of course, and, as I said in my response to him, the problems affecting local media have been apparent for some time. They are structural problems, which is precisely why we believe that the right approach to take is to ask for an independent assessment of those structural problems, which Dame Frances Cairncross is carrying out and which will be completed shortly. When it is, we have asked Dame Frances to give clear indications of what she believes the answers may be so that we can consider what action a Government can properly take. That is the right approach to what is a structural and long-term problem, as he says.

In answer to another of the hon. Gentleman’s questions, I indicated to him in my initial response that I have had a conversation with David King, as he did over the weekend, and I spoke to JPI’s managing director today. Those are the conversations that I have had since this announcement was made on Friday. He seems to suggest that the Government should do more. He will be aware that, in addition to the Cairncross review, we have made concessions on business rates for newspapers, and we have looked at other ways in which we can help. He will be well aware that local papers were very clear that if the Government had brought into force section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, they would be significantly affected by it. Indeed, Johnston Press itself responded to the consultation on this matter. The hon. Gentleman may have seen what it said, but, in case he missed it, let me remind him. It said that the impact of section 40 could cost its business £6.7 million. It went on to say that it would force many of its papers that operate on the slimmest of margins to become unprofitable and that they would therefore have to be closed.

I respect the hon. Gentleman’s position on section 40. It is long held and, by him, deeply felt. What he cannot do is come to this House and accuse the Government of doing too little to help local papers when he himself would take action that would profoundly damage them.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend’s recognition that the economic difficulties facing Johnston Press are the same ones that are now affecting all local newspapers, and that this situation is contributing to a real threat to the proper functioning of local democracy. Will he consider that one way of addressing this is to build on the BBC’s local democracy initiative, which is already funding 150 journalists? The obvious people to make an extra contribution towards the internet technology giants, who are responsible for at least some of the problems now affecting newspapers.

Jeremy Wright: I will first address my right hon. Friend’s second point. He is right that we need to consider the impact on local news of the increasing transfer of particular advertising to online platforms. Of course, it is also important to consider how we ensure that content is properly paid for when it is used. Of course, it is also important to consider how we ensure that content is properly paid for when it is used. He is also right that local democracy reporters have a part to play. It is important to note that the content they produce is made available to local newspapers, and I am sure that this assists those local newspapers in producing copy.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Local journalism and local journalists are the lifeblood of our media. I welcome much of what the Secretary of State has said, although we have not heard enough about the guarantee for pensions, workers’ rights and jobs, and I have spoken to a number of journalists who are deeply concerned. He will know that the National Union of Journalists has voiced significant concerns about the long-term intentions of the company’s new owners, amid fears that it has been purchased with a view to asset stripping. Does he believe that it would be prudent for the new owners to make a commitment to staff regarding their motivations for taking over and to offer assurances about their long-term plans for Johnston Press?

Much has been said about what can be done, and the demise of Johnston Press has largely been put down to the rise of digital media, so I am sure that the Secretary of State will find it more than passing strange that the previous chief executive will be the new chief executive in that new company. A company has failed, and I think we all find it very strange that it has shut down, moved
on some of its debts and pension liabilities, and popped up with a shiny new name. We must be sure that the workers’ rights and pensions are protected.

The Secretary of State may know that Norway has the strongest penetration of digital news subscriptions of any country, as almost two thirds of Norwegians mostly find news by going directly to traditional news providers. He may therefore also find it strange that one of the major shareholders—the Norwegian investor, Christen Ager-Hanssen, who is in Parliament today—has been shut out and that his shares are now valueless. Will the Secretary of State meet me, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and Mr Ager-Hanssen to discuss the issues? I recommend Lesley Riddoch’s film, “Nation”, which looks at Norway’s model of funding the second newspaper in every region of Norway. Will he look at that model and compel Frances Cairncross to include it in the review in order to look at the options available for workers, who we think of today?

Jeremy Wright: Let me pick up three of the hon. Lady’s points. First, she mentioned pensions. As I said, the Pension Protection Fund is now engaged with this, and the action it now takes is a matter for that body. It is important that the fund and the Pensions Regulator have the chance to consider this properly, as they are now doing.

Secondly, the hon. Lady asked about the long-term commitment of the new owners. Again, that is a matter for them. What I should have said is that, as she will appreciate, the headquarters of Johnston Press are in Edinburgh, so it is of course necessary for us to work with the Scottish Government to ensure that, if further actions are necessary, we take them in conjunction with the Scottish Government.

Finally, the hon. Lady invited me to meet her, the shadow Secretary of State and a shareholder. Earlier, I mentioned the risk that there is a quasi-judicial role for me to complete in this process. We do not yet know whether I will need to do so, but I think it best that I am prudent about that at this stage so, if she will forgive me, I will not accept her kind invitation at this point.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, in case it is relevant. I am well served in my constituency by an excellent local paper, The Herald, and an excellent local radio service, provided by BBC Oxford. We have done a lot to try to support local newspapers, not least through the BBC reporting initiative and the alleviation of business rates. Can the Secretary of State comment on whether local councils and, indeed, Government will continue to place statutory advertising of State comment on whether local councils and, indeed, the alleviation of business rates. Can the Secretary of State meet me, the hon. Member for Oxford. We have done a lot to try to support local democracy, as he rightly said; they are also the only talent pipeline left for young working-class people to break into journalism, and those young people are today left wondering what on earth the future holds for them.

Jeremy Wright: These titles are important, for the reasons that the hon. Lady gives. As I have explained, there are good reasons why I must be cautious at this stage in what I say about this particular transaction, but she has my assurance that I will be looking for the new owners of these titles to give what assurance they can that they recognise what she has said, what I have said and what we have all said so far in this exchange about the importance of these local titles and the need to maintain them where we can.

Mr Shaiilesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I first pay tribute to my two local newspapers, the Hunts Post, whose editor is Daniel Mansfield, and the Peterborough Telegraph, which is now owned by JP Media, and in particular the editor, Mark Edwards, and his staff, who do a fantastic job serving the local community?

My right hon. and learned Friend spoke of the need to reduce debts by £85 million and the possibility of job losses. Will he give the House an assurance that the next time he speaks with Mr David King, he will press him not only to do the statutory minimum to help these people, but to do anything else that can be reasonably expected to help those who are unfortunate enough to lose their jobs?

Jeremy Wright: Yes.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Following the news, there was widespread public support for the Sheffield Star, the Sheffield Telegraph and the excellent Yorkshire Post, and particularly for the staff who work for those papers. The Secretary of State said earlier that he believed that all those in receipt of a pension would be protected. There is concern that those in receipt of a final salary pension will not be protected when they move over to the new company. Can he provide clarity on that?

Jeremy Wright: My understanding is that all those currently in receipt of their pension will not be affected by this change. As the hon. Lady will see, the Pensions Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), is sitting next to me, and if that is incorrect, one of us will write to her to explain, but that is my understanding.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Having worked in the media for a great part of my life and for many years as a freelancer, I really understand the importance
of our local newspapers and the type of publications that Johnston Press publishes, for not only disseminating news but training journalists. It is a place for people to start learning their trade, and they then go on to national papers. We need these people. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that he is taking high-quality journalism to heart and that the review will look at the balance between traditional publications and online publishers? We need balance and fairness.

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I am happy to do that. In fact, the first newspaper I ever appeared in was my hon. Friend’s local newspaper, so it has a particular place in my heart. She is right: one thing that we expect Dame Frances Cairncross to do, and upon which we will wish to act, is to preserve good-quality, well-sourced, authoritative journalism at local and national levels. It is fundamental to the way in which we hold power to account, and it is an important part of the antidote to so-called fake news, on which my hon. Friend’s Select Committee has done such good work.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

May I pick up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who asked what will happen to people who are currently in receipt of pensions? I do not think it is correct to say, as the Secretary of State has said, that their pensions will not be affected, because they will be uprated in line with consumer prices index inflation rather than retail prices index inflation for years to come. If someone expects to carry on taking a pension for 20 years, they will lose out on thousands of pounds if their pension is uprated at this lower rate. Will the Secretary of State confirm that people who are currently in receipt of final salary pension schemes at JPI Media, to which they have now been transferred from Johnston Press, may indeed lose out to the tune of thousands of pounds because of these changes?

Jeremy Wright: Again, I must I am afraid remind the House of what I said earlier. There are good reasons why, at this stage at least, I need to be cautious about what I say about the detail of this transaction and the background to it. What I would say to the hon. Lady is that it is very clear that this business was having significant difficulty before this transaction was carried out over the course of the weekend, and were these businesses to have been liquidated there would have been very serious consequences for all concerned. As I say, it is important that I am cautious at this stage about what I say.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am occasionally able to write in a local newspaper, and such newspapers occasionally write about me.

May I put it to my right hon. and learned Friend that I am cautious at this stage about what I say._expr_57x-1033_7594_19 NOVEMBER 2018_581_582 of our local newspapers and the type of publications that Johnston Press publishes, for not only disseminating news but training journalists. It is a place for people to start learning their trade, and they then go on to national papers. We need these people. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that he is taking high-quality journalism to heart and that the review will look at the balance between traditional publications and online publishers? We need balance and fairness.

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[Mr Robert Goodwill]

deaths—if only to check that they are still alive themselves. Does the Secretary of State recognise the importance of that element of local newspapers, particularly for those who do not have access to digital media?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I do, and that is one of the many reasons why we are all concerned to ensure that local papers have a presence in the media landscape and a long-term future.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I stress to the Secretary of State the importance of regional newspapers? The Yorkshire Post, founded in 1754, has been essential in making the case for Yorkshire and the north in the latest rail timetabling shambles. It is important that we have regional journalism that allows pressure to be put on the Government, so what does the Secretary of State think he can do to ensure that there is strong, independent regional journalism in this country?

Jeremy Wright: I rather agree with the hon. Lady that there is a significant role for the regional press as well as the local press. It is a part of the landscape that we need to consider carefully. She will be aware of the Hull Daily Mail, which does good work online. That is an important point, because we must accept, as the local press does, that people are increasingly consuming their news online. Local papers need to be able to adapt to that. Some, such as that paper, are doing so very successfully, and others need to learn similar lessons.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that we should be celebrating a good news story today, in that all operations have continued and will continue in the future? Does he agree that the company has spoken clearly about both keeping employee rights and ensuring that the newspaper titles continue to be printed?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right—the alternatives available to Johnston Press at this stage were immeasurably worse. As I set out to the House at the outset, a number of steps were taken to seek an alternative course, none of which was successful. He is right to recognise that, at this point at least, all the titles continue and all jobs have been retained, but of course, as we have discussed this afternoon, there are many long-term challenges facing not just that company but others in the same space.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I declare an interest: I write a weekly unpaid column for The Scotsman, which despite its troubles is possibly still the proudest title among daily newspapers in Scotland. Along with its sister the Edinburgh Evening News, it is one of the titles affected by the changes. I have had communications over the weekend from executives of the former company and from the new owners, and from former colleagues, now constituents, who are concerned about exactly the issue that has been raised today. They fear that they stand to lose tens of thousands of pounds from their pensions now that they have left the company, because under PPF rules they could lose 10%. I appreciate the Secretary of State’s possible quasi-judicial position, but can he assure the House that he will bear in mind the position of both the staff and former staff of the titles affected?

Mr Speaker: I was hoping that the question mark was approaching, and fortunately it did, just in time.

Jeremy Wright: I entirely understand the concern that the hon. Lady and others have expressed. We are particularly concerned for those employed now and those in receipt of their pensions. As I have said, the PPF will need to determine its view of the transaction first, and then, in conjunction with the trustees of the current pension scheme, it will need to determine what action should be taken. She is right to express concern, and we have too. We will continue to pay close attention to what all the relevant bodies say.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Hemel Gazette in my constituency is a Johnston Press paper. Although no people in my constituency work on it, my thoughts are with those who are concerned about their future and their pensions. May I ask about a group of people we have not heard about, the small suppliers and the small creditors? They will have heard about everything going on this weekend, with the big creditors taking over the same management team. That must be of real concern to the small creditor—whether that is legal. They stand to lose thousands and thousands of pounds and may well go under because the big companies will get all the money, while the company will operate in exactly the same way as before but under a slightly different name.

Jeremy Wright: I hope my right hon. Friend will forgive me—I am going to sound like a cracked record by the end of this urgent question—but there are reasons why I need to be cautious at this stage about what I say about the transaction and the way it has been conducted. There will be inquiries made into the way in which this has transpired, including the effect on small creditors. At this stage, we must await some of those conclusions before taking matters further.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Johnston Press pursued a very aggressive acquisition strategy over the past 10 years, which has partly put it in this position. It has left titles such as The Scotsman and the Edinburgh Evening News operating on very, very small numbers of staff. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether there is any liability to the public purse and if so what he will be doing to pursue the new company to ensure that the public purse is repaid?

Jeremy Wright: For the reasons I have just given, I will not comment on the nature of the transaction itself. The hon. Gentleman is right that over the preceding years Johnston Press has acquired a number of different titles. That, of course, is a matter for its judgment. In the process of looking at the transaction, it will have to answer for judgments and decisions it has made. At this stage, however, we must await what the various bodies I have described conclude.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): The Ilkeston Advertiser, part of the JPI Media group, is the last remaining weekly local newspaper in my constituency. What more support can my right hon. Friend offer such local titles to help them to survive, because they play such an important part in our communities?
Jeremy Wright: We can all do our bit to ensure we support our local titles. It is right that some titles move more online, as that is where the reader is going, and it is right that the Government do what they can. We have mentioned some of the financial incentives that the Government have already brought forward. Beyond that, I look forward to more structural and long-term solutions emerging from the Cairncross review and our considerations of it.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Mr Speaker, your encyclopaedic knowledge should include the Belfast News Letter, the longest continuously printed English language daily paper, printed from 1737. It notably revealed that America had struck independence in 1776. It is one of the titles under consideration with Johnston Press. I hope the Secretary of State understands that there is more to this than just currently employed staff and future and current pension holders; there is an historical legacy and a contemporary contribution to the principle of a free press.

Mr Speaker: It is a notably illustrious organ, I feel sure. I also feel sure that the organ concerned will get to hear of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point—one that had not yet surfaced in this conversation. As he says, it is not just about those who work on these publications now, or even those who read them now; it is about those who have worked on and read them, over preceding centuries in the case of the publication he mentions. They are an important part of the fabric of our local communities. For that reason, we wish to see them preserved. As I have said, it may be that they are not preserved in quite the form they were in the 1770s, but there is an opportunity for local papers to grow with the times and for us to continue to support them even into the 21st century.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My constituency is served by seven local newspapers, all with separate circulations. Time means I cannot, like some colleagues, get them all into Hansard. However, five of them are owned by the Mirror Group. Last week, the editors of those five titles were made redundant. In the light of what has happened with the Johnston Press, will the Secretary of State say what conversations he might have had with the Mirror Group to check on its ongoing commitment to local newspapers?

Jeremy Wright: I am now alerted to that. The process that we described—in the form of the Cairncross review—is designed to confront some of the systemic challenges that affect not just Johnston Press, but many other companies in this space. There is nothing particularly unique, I think it is fair to say, in the experience that Johnston Press has been having. It is a structural challenge for local newspapers and one that we must address in a structural way.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Batley & Birstall News has been serving my constituency for 140 years and, with the Spenborough Guardian, is a much loved title. They have fantastic campaigns such as “Love Your High Street”. My concern about the reconfiguration is that there will be some asset stripping and only the most profitable titles will remain. While The Yorkshire Post is fantastic—I applaud it for its journalism, which is very rigorous and wide-reaching—my concern is that the smaller titles, which provide a counter-narrative to some of the harshest, most polarising voices elsewhere, will be lost to our communities.

Jeremy Wright: Again, I understand the hon. Lady’s concern and her enthusiasm for her local titles. As has been said, it is right to point out that at this stage all titles are preserved by this move. The alternatives, as far as Johnston Press could see, were all immeasurably worse, but both she and I will want to hear from the new owners about their plans for the longer term. It is only fair to give them space to develop those plans, but once they have done so, she and I will wish to seek further information about what they intend to do.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Johnston Press group has four titles in my constituency—The Southern Reporter, The Berwickshire News, the Hawick News, and the Selkirk Weekend Advertiser, which provide excellent local news to my constituents—but in an increasingly competitive environment, particularly with BBC local platforms, which I know cause them great concern, what more can the Government do to support local journalism?

Jeremy Wright: We can do more and we seek to find inventive ways of doing more to account for the changing circumstances in which all these newspapers find themselves. If I may, I will make a conditional point that my hon. Friend brings to mind. Those observing these proceedings might be surprised that Members of this House, who are held to account by local newspapers, would mourn their passing, but it is credit to our democracy that all of us believe that it is right that those in power should be held to account. That applies not just to those in Whitehall, but to town halls up and down the country and, dare I say it, to local Members of Parliament, who are held to account in some cases by four publications at once.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Johnston Press at Dinnington in my constituency was a crucial part of a £163 million coalfield regeneration project under the Labour Government in 2006. It currently boasts The Yorkshire Post—I believe it to be a national newspaper—and prints many other national titles for the north of England as well. The Minister said what he would like to do to make sure that the jobs are there—that is right and proper—but will he tell us what influence he has on the Pension Protection Fund and the regulator?

Jeremy Wright: As the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate, both are independent. They make their own judgments and we must let them do that, but the Government will want to consider the position once they have done so, and to seek to know whether there is further action we can take. The right hon. Gentleman is right, as was his hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), that there is an important regional component to our press. We might, as he says, argue that that verges on the national in some cases—[Interruption.] We should certainly not miss the argument that there is a regional layer to our press which adds considerably to oversight and scrutiny, and we must seek to preserve it where we can.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Torbay is well served by a mix of media, including a traditional newspaper, the Herald Express, a community-owned hyper-local newspaper, the Torbay Times, and the more citizen journalism-based The People’s Republic of South Devon, which is online—I suspect Opposition Members might prefer its editorials. Will the Minister look at how we can sustain local newsrooms by perhaps reviewing how local media operations can become more cross-platform, particularly by looking at such things as small-scale digital audio broadcasting?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, we will look at that. We want to consider all possible ways of assisting the more general landscape that my hon. Friend describes. There may well be more that online companies can do to help, more that companies elsewhere can do, perhaps more that the BBC can do, and certainly more that local and national Government can do. We will look at all the possibilities.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This is just the latest example of what the Work and Pensions Committee described as “ripping off pensioners” using pre-packs. I understand that the Government announced they were holding a review into the impact on pensions of pre-pack administrations. Has the Secretary of State discussed when that review and its results are likely to be published, and when some of the pressure on the Pension Protection Fund will be relieved, as it is under enormous strain and going way beyond what it was intended to do?

Jeremy Wright: The Pension Protection Fund has over £30 billion-worth of assets and can cover these liabilities. On the hon. Gentleman’s broader point, again I am fortunate that my hon. Friend the Pensions Minister is sitting along the row from me. I am sure he will write to the hon. Gentleman with the timescales he seeks.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): As a former journalist, it strikes me that the party that stopped section 40 and facilitated local democracy reporters has a great deal to be proud of in this House. On the subject of local democracy reporters, it occurs to me that the Cairncross review has a huge opportunity to propose far more of that sort of thing, and it would be much more profitable for all of us if we ended up with a set of measures that resulted directly in local democracy reporters, for instance, rather than a simple fund.

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend speaks with considerable expertise, as he says, and I hope he will find time next Wednesday, or on another occasion, to come and speak to Dame Frances Cairncross and discuss with her the matters he has raised.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am very glad that neither the highly esteemed Northern Echo nor the excellent Teesdale Mercury is affected. Given that there is a structural problem, will the Secretary of State consider extending the Localism Act 2011 to local newspaper titles so that local communities and journalists can take them over, run them on a co-operative basis and protect them from this asset stripping?

Jeremy Wright: That is an interesting idea. If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will consider it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Although Johnston Press being in administration is a source of concern, will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming JPI Media’s statement that existing titles, such as the Crawley Observer, will continue? In his dealings with the new company, will he continue to press that point?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I will. As my hon. Friend says, those who work in publications such as the one he mentions could have found themselves redundant today, so this is a good start, but we will need to know a good deal more about the new owners’ intentions, and as I have indicated, I will continue to seek further reassurances from them.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The Yorkshire Post is a great example of the role that regional newspapers play in strengthening our democracy at all levels. What concrete steps has the Secretary of State taken to strengthen the industry, protect jobs and secure current pension rights at Johnston Press?

Jeremy Wright: I have mentioned some of the things the Government have already done, such as introducing concessions on business rates and ensuring that section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 does not come into force and damage local journalism considerably, and we will do more. It is important that we consider these issues in the round, because they are structural problems that have been around a long time, as we have already discussed. I am sure that the hon. Lady will look carefully at Dame Frances Cairncross’s findings, as will the Government. We do not have long to wait, and when we have them, I think we will have a clearer idea of what the structural solutions might be to these structural challenges.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Like its Johnston Press stablemate, the Buckingham Advertiser, the Bexhill Observer hosts a fine selection of local contributors, as well as the occasional musings of its MP I chair the all-party group on the BBC. What further steps can the Secretary of State take to discuss with the BBC how more content can be shared—not just writers’ content, but perhaps video packages as well?

Mr Speaker: In respect of the journals to which the hon. Gentleman referred, for personal and family reasons it is fair to say he has a foot in both camps.

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right: there are further conversations that we can have with the BBC. Local democracy reporters have already been mentioned. I know that the BBC is very proud of what it has done in that regard and is keen to see what more might be done, and my hon. Friend’s suggestion is a very interesting and practical one which we will take up with it.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): When I graduated from Edinburgh Napier university with a first-class degree in journalism, I was told that I would be hard pushed to find work in a rapidly declining industry, but I was lucky enough to get work experience at my local Johnston Press-owned newspaper, the Midlothian Advertiser. Such local titles are essential for young people starting out, particularly—as was pointed out earlier by my
hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy)—those from working-class backgrounds. What is the Secretary of State doing to support those young working-class journalists?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady. The point about the talent pipeline is very important. We all know, from our experience as constituency Members of Parliament, very good young journalists who are starting their careers on local publications, and who will hope and expect to move on to national publications thereafter. That is one reason why it is important for us to maintain a route through local journalism, which is what we seek to do. As I have said, we have already taken a number of measures, but there are a further number that we can take. It is important for all those journalists who start where the hon. Lady did to see not just a future for themselves in local journalism, but a real career path that will excite them and make them want to continue.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Do the Government think that social media giants such as Facebook and Google should do more to support local and regional journalism, and what action are they taking to protect the future of the local and regional press?

Jeremy Wright: You will not forgive me, Mr Speaker, if I answer the second part of the question all over again, but in relation to the first part, the hon. Gentleman is right: we expect companies such as Facebook and Google to engage with this argument. They are not entirely separate from it. It is fair to say that both those companies have already taken some actions to support local journalism—quite right too—but we shall expect them to do more. We shall want, in the course of the broader review that we are conducting, to look not just at the effect of the prioritisation of news on digital platforms, but at the way in which online advertising is working. All that has an effect.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

As a former local newspaper journalist, I pay tribute to local newspapers, particularly the Reading Chronicle, the Henley Standard and The Wokingham Paper. When the Secretary of State’s review ends, will he commit himself to using all his powers to try to level the playing field between these very worthy but struggling local newspapers and the tech giants?

Jeremy Wright: As I have said, I think that we need to look carefully at the balance between the elements that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. It is undoubtedly part of the structural challenge that we have been discussing this afternoon, and I do not believe that we can come up with the appropriate structural answer unless we have considered those elements properly.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): There are three Johnston Press titles in my constituency—

Tom Watson: Name them.

Alex Sobel: Thanks. One of those papers, The Yorkshire Post, is vital to our campaign for One Yorkshire devolution. Without The Yorkshire Post, we would not have been able to bring forward a diverse set of parties.

On 14 October, in The Observer, Roy Greenslade produced a devastating critique of the way in which what has happened to Johnston Press came to pass. When the banks failed, they were deemed to be too big to fail. Now the same thing has happened. When Johnston Press ceased to be a family firm, huge acquisitions were made based on debt. Will the Secretary of State be looking at future acquisitions, whether they are debt-backed or not, and will he be looking into the media industries?

Jeremy Wright: I think we must be concerned with all similar transactions in this space, because that is important for the reasons that we have given. The hon. Gentleman will understand why—as I have already said—I will not comment specifically on the way in which this transaction has been conducted.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There are Johnston Press publications in my constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) referred to the Belfast News Letter, which is a provincial paper. The unions have expressed concern about the defined-benefit pension scheme, and have also warned that any changes in future payments in line with Pension Protection Fund payment rules would be a terrible blow to affected staff. Will the Secretary of State keep the feet of JPI Media to the fire to ensure that pensions are protected?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I will certainly seek to do that. As I have said, I am grateful to the Pensions Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who has been present throughout this urgent question. Many of the points that have been raised relate to matters surrounding the pension scheme, and my hon. Friend has been listening attentively to them. I know that he will wish to pick up on some of the points that have been made.
Points of Order

4.34 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I asked the Secretary of State if he could confirm that no one currently on a pension from Johnston Press would receive a shortfall in payments. He said to me that current pensioners would not be affected, but I am afraid that during the course of this discussion the National Union of Journalists has contradicted his account and said that some pensioners who retired under the age of 65 would indeed be affected. Is there a remedy by which the Secretary of State could check his facts and come back to the House before Hansard hits the presses tonight so that we can have an accurate account of the facts of the Johnston Press administration?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that every hon. and right hon. Member is responsible for the veracity of what he or she says in the House. The corollary of that is that if any Member has erred, and if it is a matter not of opinion but of indisputable fact, it is incumbent upon that Member to correct the record. I do not know whether the Secretary of State thinks he has erred, but there is recourse available, either now, if the facts of the case are clear, or after reflection. The Secretary of State is not under any obligation to come to the Dispatch Box, but if he wishes to do so, he can.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Perhaps I should simply say this. I, too, will check the record, but I recall saying that I gave my understanding of the current situation. I think that I also undertook to make sure that that was correct, and I shall do so.

Tom Watson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Very well. We cannot have an ongoing exchange on this, but the generosity of spirit for which I am renowned in all parts of the House gets the better of me, and I shall indulge the hon. Gentleman at this point.

Tom Watson: I have an account of exactly what the Secretary of State said. He said, “The hon. Gentleman asked me about current pensioners. As far as I understand it, they will not be affected. Anyone in receipt of their pension now will continue to be paid. The changes will affect those who are currently in employment and we believe 250 or so in total.” So if it is in fact the case that current pensioners will receive a shortfall, will he agree to come back to the House and put the matter right?

Mr Speaker: The shadow Secretary of State is nothing if not persistent. His terrier-like quality is well known to all throughout the House and to many beyond it. I do not think anything he has said is incompatible with what the Secretary of State said. The hon. Gentleman quoted the Secretary of State as saying, “As far as I understand it”. I think that what I gleaned from the Secretary of State is that he will go away and check whether what he said was correct. In the event that a correction is required, there are many witnesses to his willingness to correct the record. I think we will leave it there for now. I hope that honour is served. The Secretary of State has made his point with considerable force and alacrity, and the Secretary of State has displayed his customary courtesy.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have no doubt been observing with alarm and great concern the events in the House of Lords in which Members of the other place have overturned a decision of the Lords Privileges and Conduct Committee to suspend one of its Members for the most serious of sexual allegations. This sends the appalling message that these Houses of Parliament are not serious in tackling sexual harassment, and that we as an institution are prepared to defend our own and not take complainants seriously. Mr Speaker, I know that you have no responsibility for that undemocratic disgrace of an institution down the corridor, but there were allegations that a place in the House of Lords, in our legislature, was offered in return for sexual favours. You will know that the Adjournment Notice that referred to the House of Lords is a matter for the Prime Minister, supplied by lists from party leaders who all have a place in this House. What can this House do to ensure that this matter is robust and effectively investigated?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me advance notice of his intention to raise this point of order. Let me begin by saying what I suppose will be universally acknowledged—namely, that these are serious matters. I know that there are strongly held views in the House, and outside it, on the case to which he has referred and on Thursday’s proceedings in the Lords. I hope he will not object if I note, en passant, that he is well known for having strong views on the nature, composition and source of membership of the other House, which he frequently expresses in colourful terms. However, I do not think that this House would be well served by itself pursuing serious personal allegations against a Member of the Lords, especially where the House of Lords has itself not decided on any outcome. The House of Lords has, as I understand it, referred this matter back for consideration. I am not justifying that; nor am I criticising it. I am simply noting what I believe to be the factual position. These are matters for the House of Lords. I urge Members to think how we would resent it if Members of that place raised an equivalent matter about a Member here that had been remitted to the Standards Committee for its further consideration. The issue is important, and it will be considered elsewhere. I respect the integrity of the hon. Gentleman in raising his legitimate concern.

Pete Wishart: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that, but appointments to the House of Lords are a matter for this House, and there is a serious allegation that an offer of membership of the House of Lords was based on sexual favours. Surely that must therefore be a matter for this House that must be vigorously investigated.

Mr Speaker: The case will have to be determined. In so far as the hon. Gentleman is drawing to my and the House’s attention the fact that there is a role for Members of this House in relation to the other House, I think it
fair for me, in neutral terms, to acknowledge that what he has said, as a matter of fact, is true. Perhaps we can leave it there for now. I hope that the hon. Gentleman feels that he has made his point with force. On the assumption that the appetite of colleagues to raise points of order has now been exhausted, the Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.

**Finance (No. 3) Bill**

(Clauses 5, 6, 8 to 10, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 38 to 42, 46, 47, 61, 62, 68 to 78, 83, 89 and 90, schedules 3, 4, 7, 8, 15 and 18 and certain new clauses and new schedules)

[1st Allocated Day]

Considered in Committee

[SIR LINDSAY HOYLE in the Chair]

Clause 5

Basic Rate Limit and Personal Allowance

4.42 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I beg to move amendment 6, page 2, line 24, leave out subsection (4).

This amendment would take out provisions removing the legal link between the personal allowance and the national minimum wage.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 5 and 6 stand part.

Clauses 8 to 10 stand part.

Clause 38 stand part.

That schedule 15 be the Fifteenth schedule to the Bill.

Clauses 39 to 42 stand part.

New clause 1—Additional rate threshold and supplementary rate—

“(a) the effect of reducing the threshold for the additional rate to £80,000, and

(b) the effect of introducing a supplementary rate of income tax, charged at a rate of 50%, above a threshold of £125,000.”

New clause 2—Impact of provisions of section 5 on child poverty and equality—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of the provisions of section 5 and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider the impact of the changes made by section 5 on—

(a) households at different levels of income,

(b) people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010),

(c) the Treasury’s compliance with the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010,

(d) different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England, and

(e) levels of relative and absolute child poverty in the United Kingdom.

(3) In this section—

‘parts of the United Kingdom’ means—

(a) England,

(b) Scotland,

(c) Wales, and

(d) Northern Ireland;

‘regions of England’ has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”
New clause 3—Review of the effectiveness of entrepreneurs’ relief—

“(1) Within twelve months of the passing of this Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the effectiveness of the changes made to entrepreneurs’ relief by Schedule 15, against the stated policy aims of that relief.

(2) A review under this section must consider—
(a) the overall number of entrepreneurs in the UK,
(b) the annual cost of entrepreneurs’ relief,
(c) the annual number of claimants per year,
(d) the average cost of relief paid per claim, and
(e) the impact on productivity in the UK economy.”

New clause 7—Review of changes to entrepreneurs’ relief—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact on investment in parts of the United Kingdom and regions of England of the changes made to entrepreneur’s relief by Schedule 15 to this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—
(a) the effects of the provisions on business investment,
(b) the effects of the provisions on employment, and
(c) the effects of the provisions on productivity.

(3) In this section—
‘parts of the United Kingdom’ means—
(a) England,
(b) Scotland,
(c) Wales, and
(d) Northern Ireland;
‘regions of England’ has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

This new clause would require a report on the consultation undertaken on certain provisions of this Act — alongside new clauses 11, 13 and 15.

New clause 8—Review of geographical effects of provisions of section 9—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the differential geographical effects of the changes made to entrepreneurs’ relief which extend the minimum qualifying period from 12 months to 2 years.

This new clause would require a geographical impact assessment of income tax exemptions relating to private use of an emergency vehicle.

New clause 9—Report on consultation on certain provisions of this Act—

“(1) No later than two months after the passing of this Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report on the consultation undertaken on the provisions in subsection (2).

(2) Those provisions are—
(a) section 5,
(b) section 6,
(c) section 8,
(d) section 9,
(e) section 10,
(f) Schedule 15,
(g) section 39
(h) section 40,
(i) section 41, and
(j) section 42.

(3) A report under this section must specify in respect of each provision listed in subsection (2)—
(a) whether a version of the provision was published in draft,
(b) if so, whether changes were made as a result of consultation on the draft, and
(c) if not, the reasons why the provision was not published in draft and any consultation which took place on the proposed provision in the absence of such a draft.”

This new clause would require a report on the consultation undertaken on certain provisions of this Act — alongside new clauses 11, 13 and 15.

New clause 18—Review of public health and poverty effects of Basic Rate Limit and Personal Allowance—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the public health and poverty effects of the provisions of section 5 to this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—
(a) the effects of those provisions on the levels of relative and absolute poverty in the UK,
(b) the effects of those provisions on life expectancy and healthy life expectancy in the UK, and
(c) the implications for the public finances of the public health effects of those provisions.

New clause 19—Personal allowance—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, no later than 5 April 2019, lay before the House of Commons an analysis of the distributional and other effects of a personal allowance in 2019-20 of £12,750.”

This new clause would require a distributional analysis of the effect of increasing the personal allowance to £12,750.

Kirsty Blackman: What a pleasure it is, Mr Deputy Speaker, to speak first in this debate. I very much appreciate the way the selection has worked out in my favour today. I rise to speak to amendment 6 and new clauses 7, 8, 9 and 19 in my name and the names of my SNP colleagues. For the avoidance of doubt, should the Opposition press new clause 1, new clause 3, or new clause 18, we will support them.

As I am sure that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and those on the Treasury Bench will be unsurprised to hear, I would like to start by raising my concerns about the process. It is the case that the personal allowance is reserved while matters relating to the upper limit of basic rate taxation are devolved. I therefore have issues with the way that clause 5 is constructed. I request, as I did on Second Reading, that in future years these two sections of the Finance Bill are split and considered separately. I hope that the Minister and officials will take that on board in drafting future Finance Bills. It would make the debate cleaner and easier to follow for MPs and for those outside the House. As I have said previously, there are real issues with the way that the House scrutinises both tax and spending measures, and this would be a simple change that would ensure that better scrutiny could be brought to bear on these matters.

Amendment 6 would take out provisions removing the legal link between the personal allowance and the national minimum wage. The legal link between the two was put in place to kick in in years where the personal allowance was below £12,500. I have two concerns with the removal of this link. First, we have no guarantee that the personal allowance will not in future be reduced to less than £12,500, because this House cannot bind a future House of Commons and a future Government might decide to reduce, rather than increase, the personal allowance.

4.45 pm

Secondly, the minimum wage that is in place still discriminates on the basis of age. It is not fair that those under 25 are paid less than those over 25, yet the UK
Government are backing this age discrimination. I do not believe that an over 25-year-old can live on the minimum wage as it is set, and neither does the Living Wage Foundation. I also do not believe that a 16-year-old who might reasonably have the same outgoings as somebody over 25 can live on £4.35 an hour. It is also depressing to note that 16 and 17-year-olds have had an increase of only 3.6% in their minimum wage while the rise for those aged over 25 is 4.9%. I do not understand how the UK Government can justify that, and I think they should remove the age discrimination in relation to the minimum wage so that everybody is paid a fair wage and the minimum wage is enough to live on, instead of being at a level that people cannot live on.

**Alison Thewlis** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I of course support my hon. Friend’s point on increasing the minimum wage for under-25s. Is she aware that the gap between the rate for 16 and 17-year-olds and the higher rate has widened over the past three years?

**Kirsty Blackman** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I am not surprised that that has happened, because any Government who believe that a 16-year-old can live on less than an over 25-year-old are not going to make rational decisions in relation to pay for those at the younger end of the age spectrum. It would be a very good move if the UK Government were to change their policy and move to a situation where 16 and 17-year-olds, and those all the way up to 25, and in fact those over 25, were paid an amount that a 16-year-old actually live on, rather than an amount that does not enable them to buy the day-to-day essentials.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): This is a small, but I think important, point; does the hon. Lady accept that that minimum level is exactly what it says—a minimum level? Many people, including my apprentice, earn far more than that, but if we set the level much higher, we are likely to reduce the number of opportunities available to 16 and 17-year-olds.

**Kirsty Blackman**: I do not believe that that is true. I know somebody who went for a job interview, and at the end of it they were offered the job. The person offering them the job actually said, “How old are you, because I want to see how little I can pay you?” Those decisions are being taken because of the discriminatory nature of the way the minimum wage is set. What we should have—and this is an argument I have made to the Government on a huge number of occasions on a number of different things—is a situation where those on the bottom of the pile are protected first, and then we should get rid of discriminatory practices where people might discriminate against 16 and 17-year-olds. I would raise the bar, rather than lower it; that is generally an argument I have made to the UK Government.

New clause 19, which we hope to push to a vote today, proposes that the Chancellor brings forward a report that analyses the distributional and other effects of a rise in the personal allowance to £12,750 in 2019-20. It is Scottish National party policy that the personal allowance be raised to £12,750. Given the increasing, and staggering, levels of in-work poverty, given the UN report criticising the UK Government’s implementation of austerity, and given the fact that millions of families across the UK have savings of less than £100, increasing the personal allowance even by a small amount will have an impact on the individuals and families who are struggling the most.

It is no incentive to work if we know that when we work we will still not be able to get out of all-consuming poverty. We need a UK Government who recognise that those who earn the least are suffering the most. In Scotland, the SNP has recognised that and we have made progressive changes to the tax system.

I do not want to live in a country where children are going hungry. The UK Government have got their head firmly in the sand on this issue. I do not understand how they can continue along this track when we are having people come into our surgeries in tears because they have not eaten in days.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is right. There are probably between 3 million and 4 million people in this country on poverty wages and a large number of them are driven to use food banks. Food banks were introduced for people waiting to get their refugee status sorted out, not for this purpose. Does the hon. Lady agree that they have, however, now become an institution in this country?

**Kirsty Blackman**: I absolutely agree and will come on to food banks, but on refugees and those seeking leave to remain in the UK, these are the people I see in my surgeries in the highest levels of poverty. They cannot work because the UK Government are not allowing them to, even though they have a valid immigration application. Concerns have been raised with me about individuals whose children are literally starving as a result of the UK Government saying that they cannot work or have recourse to public funds. This is a hostile environment that is impacting directly on the lives of children. The UK Government need to rethink. The bar should be set where children are not starving as a result, and then we can take action against those who are trying to swizz the system.

The only decent meal that some children receive is the meal that they have at school. The UK Government cannot continue to say that food bank use is increasing in European countries too, as if that somehow makes it okay. They have a responsibility to step up and to change the tax system, the minimum wage and the social security system to ensure that no child ever goes hungry.

Our new clause 7 would require a review of the impact on investment of changes to entrepreneurs’ relief, which extend the minimum qualifying period from 12 months to two years. Given that we have Brexit hanging over us and the massive uncertainty that that brings, putting another hurdle in the way of businesses is probably not the right course of action. Both the Chartered Institute of Taxation and the Association of Taxation Technicians have raised concerns about the unintended consequences of the change. I believe that a review is the only sensible option going forward. The Treasury regularly makes tax changes, but it does not regularly review their effectiveness, even after they have been in place for a number of years, and when it does it rarely makes those reviews public. It is all well and good to think that something may have a certain effect, but it is necessary to check whether the intended effect has come about. If such changes are made, a review should...
be undertaken regularly—certainly in the following two years—and it should be made public, in the interests of transparency and good policy making, so that everybody can see not just that the change has taken place, but what its effect has been, so that we are up front and honest and everybody is clear.

New clause 8 concerns the geographical effect of clause 9. The UK Government often fail to recognise the rurality of many of Scotland’s communities, and I am not clear that this change will not have a significant effect on those in our most remote communities. These are places where it is hard to get the staff we need for our life-saving services and where depopulation is a real and ever-present concern. They are also places that will be hit incredibly hard by ending freedom of movement.

Given the hit to our crofters over the convergence uplift that was supposed to be given to rural communities in Scotland but was allocated elsewhere, it is clear that the UK Government are not prioritising our rural communities.

New clause 9 would require a report on the consultation undertaken on certain provisions of the Bill. Glyn Fullelove, the chair of the Chartered Institute of Taxation’s technical committee, has been critical of a number of measures in the Bill that were not previously consulted on, saying:

“The effects of inadequate scrutiny in the past are visible in the amount of tinkering in the new Bill”.

That is something I raised on Second Reading. He goes on:

“would all these tweaks have been necessary if there had been adequate consultation and more thorough scrutiny in the first place?”

If the Government intend to take back control, they need to ensure that control is in the hands of MPs, with adequate advice provided by expert stakeholders. It cannot be appropriate for tax changes to be drafted by officials and put into a Bill by the UK Government, with no opportunity for stakeholders to give oral evidence, no amendment of the law resolution and a total lack of a review of these clauses. That is not a sensible way to run anything, let alone a country. I have severe concerns about this part of the Bill. My concerns are mostly about transparency and process, as well as the lack of scrutiny of many of the measures.

In relation to the changes to personal allowance, the Government have not been progressive. We would expect that from a Conservative Government, but if they look up the road in Scotland, they will see that the changes that we have made have benefited the people at the bottom of the pile. The UK Government need to do more to benefit those people.

Lastly, the UK Government need to take seriously the fact that the personal allowance is not devolved to Scotland but the basic rate is, and changes need to be made. I would appreciate it if the Chancellor committed to considering making changes in the drafting of the Bill to separate out the devolved and reserved issues, so that we can have proper debates and better read-across, so that we can have transparency in the discussion of tax and spend in this place and so that we can make better laws as a result.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is an enormous pleasure to speak in this Committee stage of the Finance (No.3) Bill, and it is an even greater pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) in today’s debate. There are always many responses to a Budget and a Finance Act, and people often look at them and pull them apart over time. In this case, however, I think most people would say that the Budget and Finance Bill have been tremendously well received among financial commentators and many pressure groups. One of the areas that have been most well received is the bringing forward by a year of the increases to personal allowances. The increase to £12,500 for basic rate taxpayers and £50,000 for the higher—40p—taxpayers will make a direct impact on the lives of 32 million of our fellow residents.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): Is my hon. Friend absolutely delighted, as I am, that this means that a basic rate taxpayer is paying some £1,200 less in tax, on an annual basis, than they were in 2010?

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is correct. The very recent change will benefit basic rate taxpayers to the tune of £120 a year—a direct tax cut for millions of hard-working Britons—and that is to be welcomed.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my hon. Friend—I nearly called him my right hon. Friend, but he is not yet; perhaps he will be in the future—agree that the difference in the figures is stark? The personal allowance was £6,475 when this policy kicked in in 2010, and it has gone way up to £12,500. Surely, that is of huge benefit to the people we want to give more money to.

Julian Knight: I thank my hon. Friend for that short intervention. She makes a really good point, and it is almost the next point that I was going to make. The personal allowance will have nearly doubled in just eight short years. That is against a backdrop of trying to get the public finances under control from a debt of £152 billion a year—11% of GDP—which is an astronomical level outside wartime. It represents a real achievement for the Government to have been able to put this amount of money into the pockets of millions of hard-working Britons each year, so that their living standards can rise, despite the difficult decisions we have had to make.

Members from all parts of the House will probably know that I am no particular lover of the Liberal Democrats, and I am pleased to say that in my constituency of Solihull, we are now 24,000 votes ahead of them. However, I pay tribute to them in one respect. In the 2010 coalition agreement, we took on board what the Lib Dems had been proposing, and it was an excellent idea. I am pleased that the Conservative party was open enough to take on that idea and follow it through, from the coalition agreement, to raise those standards of living and raise personal allowances. I pay tribute to that sort of ideas process from the coalition. We have carried it on, as we see it as a key way in which to reduce inequality and expand opportunity.
The £50,000 higher rate tax threshold is also being delivered a year early. Opposition Members often criticise the new threshold, saying it is a tax cut for wealthier people and so on, but it will be taking many thousands of people whom one would not think should be paying the higher rate out of paying 40% income tax. For example, deputy headmasters and headteachers often earn more than the £50,000 threshold. It is wrong that so many hard-working public and private sector workers are dragged into the higher rate of tax. Furthermore, that has a damaging effect on the overall productivity of the economy, because someone who could earn extra by doing extra overtime, taking on a second job, or doing consultancy or freelance work is less likely to do so if they think the tax authorities would take half the money they would earn by doing so. This measure is therefore eminently sensible, to prevent the most productive in our economy from being penalised in this way and to allow them to continue to earn. We have seen fiscal drag in this country over the past 17 years, since the end of the first Blair Government’s sticking to the Major Government’s financial strategy. Since then, the fiscal drag has meant that more and more people who should not have been paying the 40% rate of tax have been dragged into it. I am pleased that has been acknowledged by this Government with this measure, and I am happy to support it this evening.

Labour Members have also talked about reducing the advanced rate threshold to £80,000, which is a fool’s errand. We know from history that, in general, when we penalise at the top end, our tax take comes down. Putting dogma aside, we know there is a sweet spot in the taxation system, where we should try to maximise our revenues while supporting productivity and ensuring there are sufficient incentives in the tax system. The placing of the original advanced rate was a political move in itself; for some 98% of the time that Gordon Brown was Chancellor or Prime Minister, he kept the rate at 40% and did not increase it, because he saw the reality of the situation, which is that the more we allow people to keep of their own money and the more they can keep in their pocket, the better it is for the economy more widely and the greater the tax take. This was political manoeuvring in advance of the 2010 election in order for my party to fall into a bear trap by suggesting we would not decrease the advanced rate of tax.

I should make another point about reducing the advanced rate to £80,000. The amount of money that would raise would be negligible, if not actually negative, and the number of spending commitments tied to that proposal are disproportionate to any sort of potential income that could be raised, even in the best-case scenario. So the tax allowances as they stand in respect of the basic rate and the advanced rate strike the right balance for our economy in the future.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is completely correct. The realities are that the more tax people keep in their pockets—the more of their earnings they keep, without that money going through the Government filter—the more efficient it is, the better it is for the economy, and the better it is for what is known as the multiplier effect through a local economy. My hon. Friend’s on-the-ground view, reported here in Committee, is testament to why the process really benefits high streets and wider local economies.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend has not yet touched on this, but the Government have kept down the corporation tax rate. Does he agree that in areas such as the south-west, where productivity is on average lower than it is in the rest of the country, it is crucial that we leave more money in local businesses so that they can invest, which will help with skills and eventually raise productivity?

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Not only does cutting corporation tax increase the tax take, as we know, but in the round it allows companies to employ more people—I think that it has made a major contribution to the jobs miracle in this country—which then feeds through the taxation system and the multiplier and into the economy more widely, thereby boosting growth and productivity, plus the tax take down the line.

The abolition of stamp duty for first-time buyers of shared ownership properties worth more than £300,000 is an important step for our economy and for strivers in our country. We all know the difficulties that come about in respect of home ownership. I got my first home when I was 31—many years ago, I hasten to add—but I had to buy outside London to get on to the ladder. Even then, people were making enormous sacrifices to find their way on to the property ladder.

Frankly, the situation that I faced is nothing compared with what younger people face now. Not only is it now more difficult in respect of having the income required to get the amount of loan needed to buy, but many people have to rely on what is known as the bank of mum and dad. All that has a damaging effect on equality in our society and the passing down of wealth through the generations if we end up in a situation where those who gain housing wealth do so only if their fathers or mothers had that housing wealth themselves.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving an important speech. Does he agree that in this context it is extremely important that we have embarked on the biggest programme of house building since the 1950s?

Julian Knight: That is exactly right. The point may not be specifically germane to the amendments we are debating, but my hon. Friend is absolutely correct about the context. This is just part of one strand of the strategy that we have to bring about an increase not only in home ownership but in the number of properties available to rent and basically for housing throughout the country. We know from the number of households that are forming that we need to build much more than we are building. This measure is part of considering the issues in the round, so I congratulate the Government in that respect.
We are now seeing the effects of things such as Help to Buy and of measures that—pardon the pun—build on Help to Buy, such as the abolition of stamp duty for shared ownership properties worth more than £300,000. According to the Financial Times—such an august newspaper that it never actually employed me—the rate of home ownership among first-time buyers is now at its highest in a decade. There is a long way to go before we get anywhere near where we were in the 1980s, for instance, but it has been a remarkable turnaround compared with where we were in 2010. The abolition of stamp duty for these properties sends a strong message, not only to people in shared ownership homes but to people more generally, that opportunities are out there and that we will help them by not imposing stamp duty.

Let me turn to tax fairness for individuals, which, I think, overarches the clauses and amendments to the Bill. We would not know this from hearing some of the arguments in this place, but the tax gap in the UK is one of the lowest in the developed world. That does not mean that there is not more to be done. Although we took some first steps in this Budget with internet companies and with organisations such as Amazon, everyone recognises that we need to go further, and we hope to move together in an international context to ensure tax fairness.

Since 2010, we have seen a cracking down on evasion—for example, in film investment schemes and schemes that collectively invest in property to avoid stamp duty. There has been a real concentration by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and Treasury Ministers to ensure that people are aware that everyone should be paying their fair share in society. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) mentioned tax equality and how much people are paying at the top end. I find it very telling that the top 1% in our society currently pay 28% of the tax, whereas the top 10% pay 60% of the tax. People would not believe that given the discussions of child poverty out into the open. The Government increasingly seek to implement their austerity agenda—for that is what it is—behind closed doors. They will no doubt see our new clauses as an irritant that would highlight the differences between a slash-and-burn approach to public services by the Government juxtaposed with a policy of investment, renewal and rebuilding from this party based on a fair taxation system, as identified in our new clauses.

The Government have practised their manoeuvres in Committees that they have stitched up to give themselves the majority, which they do not deserve, and they do not have the guts to allow proper amendments to their Bill. No Minister has had the decency to defend that position and it is pretty pathetic. The electorate did not give them that mandate, but they arrogantly take it in any event, so it is important that we debate and tease out the issues that we have set out in new clauses 1, 2 and 3.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend answered the hon. Lady’s intervention better than I did, so I do welcome what he said.

Let me sum up. In its treatment of tax thresholds and stamp duty, the Bill lays out a fairer tax system. It is a tax system predicated on a better society, and it is a system where people who can pay have to pay their fair share, but where that is achieved without being punitive and without, frankly, trying to put dogma over the reality of the situation.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I am glad to have this opportunity to debate the issues surrounding new clauses 1, 2 and 3 in my name and the names of others in the Committee of the whole House, and to discuss them in the context of the Government’s attempts to distract attention from their woes. We have just had a lesson in voodoo economics from the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight).

Members need to pay attention to Labour’s proposals in relation to new clauses 1, 2 and 3, but I must first point out that, in response to the Government’s authoritarian restrictions on amending this Bill, we had asked whether the entire legislation could be debated on the Floor of this House. That would at least have ensured a scintilla of constructive discussion among Members on the whole Bill. Alas, our request was denied by the Government, and we are left yet again asking for reviews and assessments as set out in our new clauses. It is important none the less to get these issues about child poverty out into the open. The Government increasingly seek to implement their austerity agenda—for that is what it is—behind closed doors. They will no doubt see our new clauses as an irritant that would highlight the differences between a slash-and-burn approach to public services by the Government juxtaposed with a policy of investment, renewal and rebuilding from this party based on a fair taxation system, as identified in our new clauses.

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Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman mentions tax cuts. Will he describe whether the Opposition support the tax cuts laid out in the Bill?

5.15 pm

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman was that busy talking about sizzling sausages and Marxism last week that he did not hear what I had to say. Now, it is not for me to constantly repeat myself—although I know the Tories do it all the time—so I suggest he reads last week’s debate in Hansard.

Luckily, I am pleased to see that even these mendacious measures are not enough to prevent this Government from a slow-motion collapse. The twists and turns continue. If the weekend reports in the media—specifically The Sunday Times—are anything to believe, if this House votes against the deal, No. 10 has a “dark strategy to twist arms.”
So what is the cunning plan? Well, No. 10 seeks to encourage a crash in financial markets after losing a first vote in the hope this stampedes MPs into voting for it a second time.

This is ordinarily known as extra-parliamentary activity. The fact that the media are actually putting that scuttlebutt into print, however bizarre, simply shows the desperation in No. 10, so it is important that we do tease out the issues, as we will with new clauses 1, 2 and 3, but this situation bears witness to the siege mentality now at pathological—some might even say clinically obsessive—levels in Downing Street.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend, like me, was glued to the television at 10 o’clock last night, watching a documentary “A Northern Soul”, about a man called Steve living in poverty in Hull and his inspiring work to help the children living in that city. I therefore give my hon. Friend my wholehearted support in particular for new clause 2, which would provide for a tax impact assessment to look at how we can genuinely help people like Steve who have suffered so badly under this Government.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is right. I am afraid that the Government are in denial over the question of child poverty; I will come back to that point shortly.

Quite simply, the Prime Minister and those around her have lost the plot; and there have been plenty of plots recently. This Government would not know progress if it stared them in the face, which is why we need new clauses 1, 2 and 3. It is little wonder that the Government have presided over eight years of economic ineptitude that have seen our tax system and society becoming increasingly unequal.

As I said on Second Reading, Labour will not stand in the way of any change that would put additional income into the pockets of low and middle earners. Maybe that answers the question of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), so he might not have to look at Hansard. Low and middle earners have borne the brunt of the economic failure of this Government and we will not take that cash out of their pockets. However, we believe that the richest in our society and those with the broadest shoulders should pay more tax to help support our public services and finally end austerity. This is not a controversial view, at least among the morally orthodox.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman mentions tax increase. If Labour were to put in its plans for a wholesale renationalisation of major parts of our economy, how much extra tax would the average British taxpayer be paying?

Peter Dowd: Dear, dear—none. The hon. Gentleman really has to take his nose out of the Tory voodoo economics book, widen his horizons and look at Labour’s “Funding Britain’s Future”.

One only needs to look at our European neighbours to see that the rate of tax on higher earners in this country is relatively low compared with Germany, France, Sweden and even Ireland. To set the ball rolling, Labour’s new clause 1 would require the Chancellor to lay before the House a distributional analysis of the effect of reducing the tax threshold for the additional rate to £80,000 and introducing a 50% supplementary rate for those earning more than £125,000 a year.

These are Labour’s policies, committed to in Labour’s very, very popular manifesto of 2017. They will put—[Interruption.] I know that Government Members do not like to hear this, but these policies will put the country on a much fairer fiscal footing, ensuring that the wealthy pay their fair share for the restoration of our social fabric, which is crumbling after eight years of gruelling Tory austerity.

The fact is that since the financial crash a decade ago, the very rich have only become richer. The Institute for Fiscal Studies identified that the top 1% have received an increase in share of total income from 5.7% in 1990 to 7.8% in 2016. In response to the hon. Member for Aldershot, it is no wonder they are paying more taxes—they have had the biggest share of total income.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that this Government are determined to tackle these important issues of income inequality, to the point where income inequality and inequality of disposable income are now at their lowest level since before the financial crisis, when his party were managing the economy?

Peter Dowd: Well, they are not making a very good job of it—there are 4 million people in poverty. That is the fact. Conservative Members can deny that until they are blue in the face, but that is the reality.

Let us move on to the issue of infant mortality. Infant mortality has risen for the first time since the 1990s, when the Tories were last in government, and, as I indicated, there are 4.5 million people living in poverty. That is a fact, and they should not pretend otherwise. They should at least have the guts to admit that their policies have got us into this situation.

This stark contrast in living standards has been driven by the Government’s remorseless austerity agenda, which has chopped away at our fiscal checks and balances. By narrowing the tax base while continuing austerity, they have entrenched poverty and inequality across the nations and regions, leaving vulnerable groups—particularly women—worse off.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a really important point, and it is reflected in the changes to life expectancy that we have seen over the last eight years. Life expectancy for the poorest women in Sheffield has fallen by four years since the Conservatives came to power in 2010. Is that not a further reflection of the devastating impact of austerity on inequality in this country?

Peter Dowd: Quite simply, it is shameful—it is as simple as that.

New clause 2 would require the Treasury to undertake an equalities impact assessment of the changes to the personal allowance and its impact particularly on child poverty. This assessment will include households at different income levels, groups protected by the public sector equality duty and the regions and nations—this is the Labour party speaking for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Such an assessment is needed now more than ever. The Social Metrics Commission recently found, as I indicated before, that 4.5 million children are living in poverty in the United Kingdom. That is shameful.
Peter Dowd:
The Government claim that none of this matters as long as parents are finding work, which ignores the fact that work is no longer a sustainable route out of poverty. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that more than two thirds of children in poverty live in a working family.

We know that the assessment set out in new clause 2 will further justify the United Nations special rapporteur’s investigation into this Government’s policy of austerity last week. The poverty envoy found that the policies of austerity had inflicted “great misery” on our citizens, and he went as far as to say that the “fabric of British society” is falling apart as a result. That is absolutely damning.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is talking a lot about the politics of austerity. The United Kingdom last lived within its means in 2001. Under a Labour Government, when would the United Kingdom next live within its means?

Peter Dowd: I do not accept the premise of these trumped-up ideas from voodoo economics presented by the Tory party. The reality is that the report was absolutely damning. It was absolutely devastating, and Government Members should be ashamed that somebody from the United Nations should come to this country and objectively lay out the facts as they are.

Sadly, in true Trumpian style, the Government chose to ignore the UN special rapporteur. Live on “Channel 4 News”, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury buried his head in the sand, saying “there is a...strong push to reduce poverty”.

Well, it is not getting pushed hard enough. The Financial Secretary refused to acknowledge that there are 1.5 million people living in destitution, despite repeated questioning. A cursory look at this Government’s policies demonstrates that, for eight years, they have felt it was reasonable to punish the poorest to let the bankers off the hook. How can this Government be so out of touch?

I now turn to new clause 3. According to HMRC’s own statistics, over £400 billion a year is spent in tax reliefs. Entrepreneurs’ relief costs £2.7 billion a year alone, and benefits only 52,000 people.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is very generous in giving way a second time. If Labour Members were to get back into power, would they change the tax system so that people had to pay tax from £6,750, as in 2010? Does he agree that that would cost working people an additional £1,000-plus a year?

Peter Dowd: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reads the shadow City Minister’s article on LabourList, which sets that out very clearly.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I’ll send you a copy.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend will send the hon. Gentleman a copy and he will sign it—and Conservative Members might actually learn something. I know it is difficult for my hon. Friends to grasp the concept that Conservative Members might learn something, but they actually might.

Entrepreneurs’ relief costs £2.7 billion a year alone, and benefits only 52,000 people. This bloated relief—and it is bloated—is overwhelmingly spent on a small number of wealthy individuals, with 6,000 claimants receiving relief on gains of over £1 million. I will repeat that: 6,000 claimants receive relief on gains of £1 million. It is no wonder then that the IFS and the Resolution Foundation have called for it to be scrapped. Clause 38 and schedule 15 represent yet another Conservative half-measure.

Rachel Maclean: As a former entrepreneur, as in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, I did not benefit from this particular relief, but many in that community do benefit from it. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that this should be scrapped, which would penalise people who start businesses in this country and go on to employ people who then pay taxes and put food on the table for their families? Is the position of the Labour party to be completely anti-entrepreneurs?

Peter Dowd: The Treasury has not reviewed the relief and does not know whether it is working, but it has chucked £2.7 billion—I repeat, £2.7 billion—at a relief that affects only 52,000 people. There is something not quite right with that. I get that and my hon. Friends get that, but Conservative Members are in denial about it, as they are about child poverty.

Leo Docherty: Given that the hon. Gentleman is against relief for entrepreneurs, will he tell the Committee whether he is also against small businesses being relieved of their rates, with business rates being slashed by one third?

Peter Dowd: Out of courtesy I will respond to the hon. Gentleman. What we want is a fair taxation system, which is completely and utterly alien to the Government. It is as simple as that.

Stephanie Peacock: My hon. Friend pointed out that the Government are in denial on child poverty. That is absolutely clear in my constituency in Barnsley, where 6,000 children live in poverty. Does he agree that poverty is a political choice caused by the Conservative party?

5.30 pm

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is right, and for the Tories that choice comes first, second and third, and it always will.

On one hand the Government are lengthening the qualifying time for investors from one year to two, but on the other hand they are ensuring that shareholders will be protected from falling below the 5% threshold needed to claim the relief when a company is sold. It is hard to see how this confused measure will tackle the growing cost of the relief.

Naturally, the Opposition, the Resolution Foundation and the IFS are not the only ones who have found this measure perplexing to say the least. The Chartered Institute of Taxation has raised deep concerns about its retrospective nature, its lack of clarity and the likelihood that the reforms will hit small businesses the hardest—the businesses that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) no doubt had in mind in her intervention. Far from making the relief more equitable, this measure will
instead insulate wealthier claimants who can rely on expensive tax advisers to navigate red tape, ensuring that the cost of the relief will continue to bloom.

The cost of corporate welfare has risen steadily under this Conservative Government. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is the one form of welfare that Government Members support. In contrast, the Labour party is committed to undertaking a full and comprehensive review of corporate tax reliefs when—not if—we reach government. That is why we have tabled new clause 3, which would require the Government to undertake a full review of entrepreneurs’ relief. The review would consider the overall number of entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom, the annual cost of the relief, the cost per claim and the impact of the relief on productivity in the UK—productivity that is 15% below our comparators in the G7 and 35% below the Germans. The Government should be getting to grips with that fact, not fiddling around with entrepreneurs’ relief.

Government Members should ask themselves how they can justify the amount of money going to 52,000 people while our public services are falling into disrepair. This relief is clearly in need of urgent review to ensure that the taxpayer is not being ripped off. They should be clear that if they choose to vote against new clause 3, they are voting against the interests of taxpayers across the country. Again, this is £2.7 billion for 52,000 people.

I hope that Government Members will support our new clauses 1, 2 and 3, for the reasons that I have outlined. This authoritarian Government of the rich, by the rich, for the rich have lost all credibility to manage the affairs of this country. They no longer know what they stand for, nor do they have the courage to find out. This Bill of broken promises takes us no further forward in meeting this country’s mounting challenges, so I call on Members throughout the House to support Labour’s proposals to create a fairer society and a fairer tax system. If we are unable to change the Government’s course, we will challenge the Bill at every step of the way, notwithstanding the authoritarian shackles put on us by this authoritarian Government, and we will use it to put an end to this aimless and divided Government.

Richard Graham: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), although there were moments during his speech when I found myself wondering whether history was being rewritten in a remarkably creative way.

The changes that the Government have proposed come against a background of remarkable achievement in cutting the deficit by four fifths, reducing the unemployment rate to its lowest since the 1970s, giving 32 million people tax cuts and taking 1.7 million out of income tax altogether. Some of those things were denied by the hon. Gentleman, who claimed at one point that the rich were only getting richer. I think it therefore falls to me to offer a few statistics to put his comments into context.

The first comes from the Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis of what went on under the previous Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman, who is chuntering with his colleague the shadow Chancellor, should focus on that IFS analysis. The independent analysis from the IFS shows very clearly that on most measures income inequality during the 13 years of the previous Labour Government went up. Part of the reason for that was explained, helpfully, by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) in an interesting interview with The Guardian on the other day. He pointed out that the attitude of the previous Labour Government was, to quote the former deputy Prime Minister, Lord Mandelson, “intensely relaxed” about the filthy rich. The hon. Member for Norwich South rightly went on to say that during the 13 years of the Labour Government:

“The huge fortunes of those at the very top...were left almost untouched.”

That is why the work done by this Government, which for example includes scrapping child benefit in 2013 for those earning over £50,000, has led to the lowest tax gap for a very long time. The percentage of income tax paid by the top 1% has doubled under the Conservative Government. The hon. Member for Bootle therefore needs to think hard about that IFS analysis. Income inequality went up under the 13 years of the Labour Government and it has gone down in eight years under the Conservatives.

There are other points worth highlighting. For example, people on lower and middle incomes actually have more money in their pockets now than at the start of the financial crisis under the previous Labour Government. The gap, as I pointed out, between those on the lowest and highest incomes is lower than it was when the Labour Government left power in 2010. In fact, income inequality is now close to its lowest point since 1986. That is a remarkable achievement. Over the past 30 years, which include 13 of a Labour Government, income inequality narrowed sharply under this Conservative Government.

Labour Members have made a lot of points about employment, so it is worth highlighting that the growth in employment benefits most the poorest 20% of households. The employment rate is now up by more than seven percentage points on where it was before the financial crisis under Labour in 2007. Thanks to the national living wage, the income of the lowest earners has actually grown by almost 5% since 2015, higher than at any other point across the earnings distribution. The actual situation today in our economy for those working is therefore very different from that painted by those on the Opposition Benches and by the hon. Gentleman.

A crucial and major difference between the Labour party and the Government is in taxing business. The uncomfortable truth for Opposition Members who would like to tax business more is that since the Government cut corporation tax in 2010 receipts have gone up by 50%, generating an extra £20 billion in 2016 over what was generated in 2010. The extra £20 billion we found for the NHS above inflation for this five-year period does not come from nowhere; it comes from increased receipts and growth in the economy. That extra £20 billion raised from corporation tax, as a result of cutting corporation tax, is one of the critical economic differences between those on the Government side of the House and those on the Opposition side. The Opposition still believe that if they tax businesses more they will get more tax. The truth, however, is that if we tax businesses less we incentivise business and entrepreneurs, generating more tax receipts to put into our vital public services.

Julian Knight: Does my hon. Friend recognise that £20 billion happens to be exactly the same amount of extra money that the Government have pledged to put into our national health service?
Richard Graham: Exactly. The figures are a coincidence, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that we are putting the same amount of extra money into the NHS—the largest ever amount invested into our national health service.

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend is painting a very lucid picture of how the Government differ from the Opposition with regard to tax, but does he agree that that also applies to our approach to private property? The discussion that the Labour party is having about the wholesale renationalisation of major parts of our economy is deeply alarming, and it should come clean to the public about how much that would actually cost.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The remark made by the shadow Chancellor earlier that the public—all our constituents—would have to pay zero extra to fund the widespread nationalisation of all the utility companies, the train companies and anything else was really quite extraordinary. To be honest, I would be surprised if somebody did not raise that on a point of order in terms of misleading the House and the nation, because clearly those figures are a mile away from what independent analysts have calculated.

Rachel Maclean: Has the shadow Chancellor not been on record stating that it does not matter if his sums do not add up, and that it is largely irrelevant, which demonstrates my hon. Friend’s point?

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As she knows well, the truth of the last Labour Government—during their 13 years—was that although they promised no more boom and bust, they gave us the biggest bust in peacetime history as a result of wildly overspending. I am afraid the net result of that is, as always, that the poorest feel the effects worst. In my constituency of Gloucester, 6,000 people lost their jobs during the great recession under Labour. Only since the Conservative Government came back have we seen employment rise sharply and youth unemployment and unemployment fall sharply.

Jonathan Reynolds: I will not repeat the debate that we always have about a global financial crisis not being solely contained in the UK, but on the earlier intervention that the hon. Gentleman took, the shadow Chancellor is not on the record as saying that his sums do not add up and that that does not matter. Let us remind the Committee that the only party that published costings of its policies at the election was Labour. It is genuinely misleading the Committee to claim that the shadow Chancellor said anything other than that.

Richard Graham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but will he confirm to the Committee what I heard the shadow Chancellor say earlier in answer to a question from one of my colleagues? He said that there would be zero additional cost to the taxpayer from the enormous, widespread renationalisation policy of Labour; will the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) confirm that there will not be a single penny of additional cost?

Jonathan Reynolds: The shadow Chancellor did not speak from the Dispatch Box. I think the hon. Gentleman is thinking of the shadow Chief Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd)—the two should not be confused. On nationalisation, I think the point that my hon. Friend was trying to make is that we can simply look at British history to see how this works. If we take an asset into public ownership and the return from that asset is greater than the cost of the borrowing to take it on, there is no net cost to the taxpayer, and certainly, income tax will not have to rise to cover that.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We are not having a debate on party policy. We have amendments and clauses before us and we are straying from them—I know you wanted to get through your speech very quickly, Mr Graham.

Richard Graham: You are entirely right as always, Sir Lindsay. It was helpful to have it exposed that there is clearly a significant difference of opinion between the shadow Chief Secretary and the shadow Chancellor on whether there will be any additional costs from the policies of the Opposition. [Interruption.] I have taken a lot of interventions, so I will cease from taking them so that I can come, as you suggested Sir Lindsay, to a rapid closure, which I am sure will be welcomed by Opposition Members.

Having made the crucial point on our approach to investment in business, let me finish on the annual investment allowance, which is a crucial part of the Budget and the clauses under discussion. This is important because it encourages businesses to invest in expensive technology that, over time, will allow them to grow and employ more people. I could give a dozen examples from my constituency of where this has been true. To give it some flavour, I will highlight just one area. The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde will know, having visited China with me last week, how far we have gone in increasing our exports to China. From Gloucester alone, we are exporting a huge number of manufactured goods, including the landing gear on all Airbus aircraft.

5.45 pm

Peter Dowd: If the hon. Gentleman is so sure of his position, what is wrong with providing for a review of the effectiveness of entrepreneurs’ relief, as new clause 3 would do?

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman is kind to mention that, but the fact is that we on the Government side of the House believe strongly in incentivising the entrepreneurs. They are the ones producing the technologies of the future—Fintech, Edtech, every sort of tech—and the reason why this country has seen more investment in technology in London alone in the last year than Germany, Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands and France put together. These incentives to businesses are what generate the additional tax revenue I highlighted earlier.

The changes to gambling tax are among the most significant measures proposed. These are fundamentally about what is morally right, and I am delighted that the Government have found a way to do the right thing, not just by reducing the maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals from £100 to £2, but by introducing it rapidly and by raising the remote gambling duty from 15% to 21%. If I could make one request of the excellent Minister, it would be that he consider other ways to reduce the amount of online gambling advertising and to raise more tax revenue from it.
This is an important discussion. Some of the facts offered earlier by the Opposition were completely astray from reality, and I strongly support what the Government are doing to incentive business, encourage more people into work and, above all, benefit the lowest earners. It is worth finishing with one last statistic from the OECD: the proportion of jobs that are low-paid is at its lowest level in this country for at least 20 years. That is a significant achievement on which we can hope to build yet further in the future.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I wish to say a few words about amendment 18, which would remove clause 5. I spoke on this at length on Second Reading, so I do not need to say a great deal.

The difficulty with clause 5 is that it combines two very different measures, the first being to lift the low earners threshold. As the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) reminded us a few minutes ago, this was a policy that I and my colleagues pursued in government, and it is not something I at all disagree with. The second, however, is a much more substantial measure to lift the tax threshold for middle earners. I do not pretend for a moment that people at the higher rate threshold are rich people—at the bottom end, they are paid less than Members of Parliament—but we need to get beyond the headlines and look at the actual numbers.

The lower threshold is to be lifted by £650, and 20% of that is £130, so the people solely on standard rate tax will get £130 in their pocket as a result of this measure. Of course, that is welcome. It is about a 2½% increase, which is roughly in line with inflation, and is unquestionably a good thing. For the high earners threshold, however, we are talking about much bigger sums of money—a £3,650 increase in the threshold. Multiplied by 20%, and we are talking about £730, but of course high earners also benefit from the standard rate threshold increase. Add the two together and we have got £860. This measure, which is badged as a measure to help low earners, helps low earners to take home £130 a year and high earners £860 a year. On no conceivable measure could that be described as some enlightened policy for helping the low paid.

Having said that, I should add that there are things that the Government could have done as part of the policy of reducing fiscal drag. I fully understand the need at the margin to stop people being dragged into higher tax rates, and something could have been done to offset that. The Chancellor himself has acknowledged that there are extremely expensive and lavish tax reliefs on pension contributions for upper earners, which cost the country about £25 billion a year. I think that if he had chosen to offset the upper-rate threshold measure by some reduction in pension tax relief for the high paid, such that it neutralised it, many of us would have thought that that was quite a reasonable way of making progress, but he did not, despite the urgent need for revenue.

In an ideal world we would be looking at tax cuts for everyone, but we are not in an ideal world. There are issues of priorities. As several Conservative Members have reminded us—former Chancellors, among others—we are living in a world of severe fiscal restrictions, despite the proclamation of the end of austerity. There are other purposes for which the money could have been better used. We are talking about £2.8 billion in the first year, tapering to about £1.7 billion a year, of which roughly half is for the upper rate threshold. We can all think of many, many ways of spending that money, but for me the priority would have been fully restoring the cuts in universal credit that were made two years ago. The Government have partly done that, but with the additional sum of £1.3 billion, the Chancellor could have returned universal credit to the levels at which it was placed two years ago, in the Osborne Budget. The money could also have been used to end the benefits freeze a year early. The continuation of that freeze means that the poorest 30% in the population are being dragged down as a result of the Budget, but ending the freeze a year early could have offset that. Obviously there are many other purposes for which the money could have been used, but those would have been my priorities.

This measure, politically, was obviously intended to enable the Chancellor to proclaim that the end of austerity is not just about public spending, but about cutting taxes. There is nothing wrong with that general proposition, but the problem is that it is dishonest: that is not what is actually happening. The revenue line in the Red Book shows clearly that as a result of revenue measures, council tax will rise by £6 billion over the next five years—that it will rise by considerably more than income tax is being cut. What, essentially, is happening is that as a result of the reduction, or the freezing, of spending on support for local councils, the councils are making up their revenue through council tax increases to the maximum extent allowed. The Government, according to their own numbers, believe that council tax revenue will rise by £6 billion to about £40 billion. That, as I have said, more than cancels out the income tax cuts, most of which in any case accrue to higher-rate earners. So this is not a tax-cutting Budget at all. It is, indirectly, a tax-raising Budget, and I hope that that will be pointed out to members of the Government when they use such rhetoric in future.

I simply wish to move my amendment, and we will seek to oppose clause 5 stand part.

Leo Docherty: It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable).

I welcome the Bill. As we consider the amendments, we are faced with a stark choice that faces all politicians and members of the public when they consider the basic question of how we manage our economy and how we manage tax and spending. It is the stark choice between responsibility and recklessness. If we cast our eyes back over the last eight years, we see the benefits of the responsible, balanced approach of the Conservatives. Since 2010 the deficit has decreased by 80%, and the economy has grown for eight consecutive years, by a total of 17%. Unemployment is at its lowest rate since 1975—the year before I was born—and the Government are managing to boost public spending while simultaneously cutting tax. I am particularly pleased about the almost doubling of basic-rate tax relief: those on the basic rate are paying £1,205 less every year than they were paying in 2010, which is a tremendous step forward.

Julian Knight: The increases in the minimum wage and the living wage have also had a fundamental impact on the earning capacity of people at the lower end of the income scale in our society.
Leo Docherty: Absolutely, and the bottom line is that that allows more people to spend more of their own money doing what they want. That is what this Government deliver.

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): Does not the rise in the tax-free allowance from £6,475 to £12,500 also mean that the tax collector will no longer have to waste time chasing and trying to track down people who are earning the basic salary to secure very small amounts that probably cost more to collect than they constitute in receipts?

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend has made a very good point. The rise is not just good for the taxpayer, but good for the Government.

This balanced, responsible approach is in stark contrast to the reckless and ideologically driven approach of the Opposition. Members will probably need no reminding that in 2016 the shadow Chancellor declared. “I am a Marxist”. He pursues—well, let us call it a policy of half-based Marxism mixed with 1970s-style union militancy.

Rachel Maclean: Does my hon. Friend recall that, along the same lines, the Labour Opposition were preparing for capital flight and a run on the pound, and does he share my alarm at that prospect?

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I share my wisdom with you both? The debate is about the clauses and new clauses before us.

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend has made a very good point. The rise is not just good for the taxpayer, but good for the Government.

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Leo Docherty: Of course the best way to measure the effect of this is in employment growth. I expect these changes to further deepen the positive impact and the positive growth in employment that we have seen recently. Having considered these amendments, I am delighted to welcome the Bill wholeheartedly. Government Members must be confident about supporting our balanced approach, in contrast to the reckless and ideologically driven approach of the Labour party. We must consider this not just in economic or fiscal terms, but in human terms. Free-market capitalism has been one of the greatest forces that the world has ever seen. It has lifted 1.5 billion people out of poverty in the past 30 years. We should be confident about that, and we should be confident in our balanced and responsible approach. I am delighted to welcome the Bill this evening.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Before I speak to my new clause 18, I want to gently chastise the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). He is not in his place at the moment, but I am sure that someone will respond to this for him. He very gently chastised the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for being selective about the data on inequalities, and he showed in his response to the plight of Emily Lydon, demonstrated this exact point in his comments on the Union, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited and callous approach”.

As I mentioned in my point of order earlier, I am afraid of course the best way to measure the effect of this is in employment growth. I expect these changes to further deepen the positive impact and the positive growth in employment that we have seen recently. Having considered these amendments, I am delighted to welcome the Bill wholeheartedly. Government Members must be confident about supporting our balanced approach, in contrast to the reckless and ideologically driven approach of the Labour party. We must consider this not just in economic or fiscal terms, but in human terms. Free-market capitalism has been one of the greatest forces that the world has ever seen. It has lifted 1.5 billion people out of poverty in the past 30 years. We should be confident about that, and we should be confident in our balanced and responsible approach. I am delighted to welcome the Bill this evening.

The reason I have tabled this new clause is that, over the past eight years or so, I have seen the gains made under the previous Labour Government being totally reversed by this Government. Those gains included the reduction in the number of children and older people living in poverty and the improvements in health including an increase in our life expectancy and reductions in health inequalities. As the UN’s special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, said on Friday, the cuts and reforms introduced in the past few years have brought misery and torn at our social fabric. He went on:

“British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited and callous approach”.

We know that there are 14 million people living in poverty in the United Kingdom, 8 million of whom are working—the highest level ever. It is fine for Conservative Members to speak on a positive note about employment rates, but they should be asking themselves why we have such high levels of in-work poverty. That, too, brings shame on us. Two thirds of the 4 million children living in poverty are from working households. How on earth are young people expected to learn and to excel at school if they are constantly hungry?

Debbie Abrahams: That is absolutely right. I will come on to some of the really worrying figures about how, from birth, our children are being affected because of the poverty that they are experiencing.

What about disabled people? Disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people because of the extra costs that they face around their disability. We have seen their social security support become absolutely emaciated. Given that we are the fifth richest country in the world, that is shocking—absolutely shocking. Four million disabled people are already living in poverty, with many now continually finding that they are becoming more and more isolated in their own homes.

Since 2015, as analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others has shown, those who are in the lowest income decile have lost proportionately more income than any other group as a consequence of personal taxation and social security changes. That is the important thing. My new clause is not just about taxation. We cannot see that in isolation from how we then ensure, as a country, that we are supporting people on low incomes—and that support is completely inadequate. What was put forward in the Budget does not go anywhere near repairing the damage that was done in the summer Budget of 2015.

Last month’s Budget produces only marginal gains to the household income of the poorest, while reducing the number of higher-rate taxpayers by 300,000.
The Government’s regressive measures have done nothing to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. When cuts to household incomes are combined with the cuts to public spending and services, the impact is even more dramatic, and again with disproportionate cuts to Government funding to towns and cities across the north, as evidence has repeatedly shown.

The effects of all this on life expectancy are now being seen, with health gains made over decades now falling away. Life expectancy has been stalling since 2011, and it is now flatlining, particularly in older age groups and for older women. In the same week—the very same week—that these data came out last year, the Government actually increased the state pension age. We know that our life expectancy is flatlining. For women—think about the 1950s-born women—it is going backwards, yet we are still putting up the state pension age. What is going on?

On top of this there are regional differences in how long people will live, with these health inequalities reflecting the socioeconomic inequalities across the country. Life expectancy for men in Windsor and Maidenhead stands at 81.6 years, while in my Oldham and Saddleworth constituency it is 77. Even within these areas, there are differences in how long people will live. Again, in the Windsor and Maidenhead local authority area, the life expectancy gap is 5.8 years for men and 4.8 years for women, while in my constituency it is 11.4 years for men and 10.7 years for women. These health inequalities are reflected right across the country. The gains Labour made in reducing health inequalities are now being reversed.

Similarly, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health reported last month that infant mortality has started to increase for the first time in 100 years. Four in 1,000 babies will not reach their first birthday in the UK, compared with 2.8 in the EU. With these are the unacceptable consequences of austerity. I welcome the Department of Health and Social Care commissioning Public Health England to investigate the causes of this declining health status, but it is very late in the day. Public health specialists—renowned epidemiologists such as Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Professor Martin McKee and many others—have been calling for this for the past 18 months. We already know from the work that they have been doing that they are pointing the finger towards austerity. It is imperative that in addition to stopping austerity, and the misery and poverty that is being wrought, we tackle the inequalities within and between regions and communities.

An analysis of the effects of the Budget’s personal taxation measures is part of this, but it should not be seen in isolation. This would be outside the scope of the Bill, but the Government should be doing an analysis of their social security and public spending cuts. Reducing the gap between the rich and the poor is not just good for the economy. As evidence from totemic reports such as “The Spirit Level” shows, life expectancy then increases, for the economy. As evidence from totemic reports such as “The Spirit Level” shows, life expectancy then increases, and the gains Labour made in reducing health inequalities are now being reversed.

The increase in the personal allowance is the latest in a line of such increases. This will mean that a typical basic-rate taxpayer will pay £1,205 less tax in the next tax year than they did in 2010-11. Importantly, the increase to £12,500 comes a year earlier than planned. That can happen because the public finances are in a better shape than had been predicted, thanks to the hard work of the British people and the sound fiscal management of my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary, and the Ministers on the Front Bench. They know that taxpayers’ money is taxpayers’ money, and they have rightly allowed taxpayers to keep more of it as soon as it has been possible to do so, as we see in these clauses. This is combined with inflation coming back under control and wages rising again in real terms. The lowest paid have not only been taken out of income tax altogether but enjoy an increased national living wage.

Leo Docherty: I share my hon. Friend’s thoughts about the increase in the personal allowance. Does he agree that one of the very significant positive things in this Finance Bill is also the—I am sorry; I will let him continue.

Jack Brereton: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I was saying, allowing taxpayers to keep more than it would have been possible to do previously is combined with inflation coming back under control and wages rising again in real terms. The lowest paid have not only been taken out of income tax altogether but enjoy an increased national living wage, thanks to this Government. We are seeing the lowest paid paying less tax but also bringing home more money. The annual earnings of a full-time—
Earnings for a full-time minimum-wage worker will have increased by £2,750 since it was introduced in April 2016.

Leo Docherty rose—

Jack Brereton: My hon. Friend can have a better go this time.

Leo Docherty: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for giving way and giving me another chance. He mentioned inflation. Does he share my view that the fact that the annual deficit has been reduced by 80% since 2010 is another very significant piece of progress with regard to inflation?

Jack Brereton: I agree with my hon. Friend’s comments, which show the responsible approach we on this side of the House have taken to the economy, compared with the approach the previous Labour Government took.

Peter Dowd rose—

Jack Brereton: And now the hon. Gentleman is going to tell us about Labour’s future approach if they ever get back into office.

Peter Dowd: As the hon. Gentleman is talking about borrowing, does he agree that the Tory party in the last eight years has borrowed more money than all Labour Governments put together?

Jack Brereton: The hon. Gentleman will have seen the figures that show that debt is now coming down to lower levels than ever before, and we have seen the deficit back under control after the failings of the previous Labour Government who got us into an horrendous mess that working families in this country ended up paying for.

We are now seeing the numbers of low-paid workers at a record low, and we are seeing low taxpayers now paying record low levels of tax. The astonishing turnaround achieved in making work pay, not least through tax measures like those before us today, means that the bottom third? of society is far worse off and that the only people who are better off under this Government’s policies are the top third?

Ruth George: Would the hon. Gentleman not agree with the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the cumulative impact of personal tax and benefit reform since 2015 has been that the bottom two thirds of society is far worse off and that the only people who are better off under this Government’s policies are the top third?

Jack Brereton: I totally disagree. We have seen increases in the national living wage and reduced tax in this Budget, and further measures in this Budget to support UC.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the fact we should be looking at is the fact reported by the OECD that the proportion of jobs that are low paid is at the lowest level for the past two decades? We should be celebrating that.

Jack Brereton: That is absolutely right. We should be looking at those figures, not some of the figures being used by Opposition Members, who want to keep people on a level of pay that is lower than it would ever be, because they want to keep people out of work and keep people in the workless society we saw under the previous Labour Government.

We on this side of the House have made work pay, and the long-term benefits of doing so are clear in the expansion of our non-inflationary production potential. The last time unemployment was so low, 40 or more years ago, there were massive peaks in inflation. The contrast with today is stark and we should be proud of our work as a country in digging ourselves out of the mess left by the Labour party.

For people in Stoke-on-Trent making work pay has added to the renaissance of our fine, proud city and its industries, and the situation is the same in once-forgotten manufacturing towns across the country, which are seeing a revival in real jobs for real levels of take home pay. Indeed the ONS estimates that real household disposable income per head was 4% higher in quarter 2 of 2018 than at the start of 2010, and the OBR expects it will increase by a further 3.2% by the end of 2023. At the same time, income inequality is down, and is lower than it was in 2010. To refute a number of the claims made from the Opposition Front Bench, the number of children in absolute low-income poverty has fallen since 2010.

Peter Dowd: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but if he is so convinced of his policies in relation to the issues he is talking about, why will he not support the provision in section 5 of the Act of an impact assessment on child poverty and equality? What has he got to fear?

Jack Brereton: The reason is that the facts show that the number of children living in absolute poverty has fallen since 2010 and will continue to fall, because of the policies of this Conservative Government.

Vicky Ford: Does my hon. Friend agree that for every £1 those on low income pay in tax, £4 of public spending goes towards them, whereas for those on higher income, for every £5 they pay in tax they receive only £1 back in public spending, and that is because we are a fair society, which means that well-off people contribute to helping those on lower incomes?

Jack Brereton: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments, which show that the highest earners are paying their fair share, while the lowest paid in society are being supported as much as we can. That is what this Government have been doing: reducing taxes for the lowest paid in society and ensuring that the lowest paid can be paid more.

I reject many of the views of the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). She made some comments about statistics and then used statistics in her own way. I will also refer to the
[Jack Brereton]

G7 by saying that only in the UK and Japan have the lowest paid seen their wages grow in that time, and income inequality is lower than it was previously.

**Debbie Abrahams:** On a point of order, Dame Eleanor. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) suggests that I have used statistics inappropriately. I can cite all my sources of evidence; can he?

**The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. Lady knows that that is not a point of order for the Chair; it is a point of debate, and, as I have said many times in here—and so has Mr Speaker—fortunately it is not the duty of the Chair to decide between one set of statistics and another. It all depends on how one applies the statistics, and the hon. Lady is perfectly at liberty to intervene on the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), as is he to take an intervention from her, where they can continue the argument between them, but I will take no part in it.

**Jack Brereton:** Thank you, Dame Eleanor. The statistics I have used show that income inequality is lower than it was before the crash, and this is all alongside our continuing to reduce the deficit and debt, and meeting our targets three years early, while continuing to invest more in our vital public services. This responsible approach to public finances has seen our economy and the number of jobs boom, compared with the spiralling-out-of-control economy under Labour.

I was pleased that the Minister with responsibility for high streets—the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)—visited my constituency on Friday and talked about some of the measures we are taking in this Budget to support towns like Longton and Fenton in my constituency, helping to address some of the issues on the high street. I hope we can get some of the £650 million pot announced in the Budget to convert many of their empty premises back into use and help with business rates to ensure that retailers with a rateable value of under £51,000 will receive relief, as that will be hugely welcome by the smallest retailers in our towns.

I also want to comment on some of the views expressed by Opposition Members about entrepreneurs’ relief. I was shocked that some of the views were so anti-business and anti-enterprise. We must condemn those views, which are damaging businesses in constituencies up and down the country.

**Peter Dowd rose**—

**Jack Brereton:** Can the hon. Gentleman answer that one?

**Peter Dowd:** The hon. Gentleman must not misquote. We are looking for an assessment of entrepreneurs’ relief, and if he believes that what he suggests is good value for money for taxpayers he would support a review of that relief. What is wrong with that?

**Jack Brereton:** I just wanted to talk about the relief in Stoke-on-Trent as well. Entrepreneurs’ relief in my constituency will help many businesses that are starting up. We have some fantastic retention rates in Stoke-on-Trent; we have some of the highest new business start-up retention rates in the country, and that relief is critical in helping those businesses.

The measures introduced in the Budget to increase the time period from 12 to 24 months will help to ensure that it is businesses that are genuinely contributing to our economy that will receive the relief, making a huge contribution to the development of new technologies and innovation that we so much support in our economies throughout the country.

The proposed reductions in corporation tax in the Budget and the relief on capital allowances, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke about, will also be a huge support for many of the businesses in my constituency, particularly manufacturers. Around 15% of the economy in Stoke-on-Trent is made up of manufacturing businesses. Those measures will be a huge support for those businesses, increasing the amount of machinery and equipment that they can buy. Increasing relief on capital allowances and the investment allowance up to £1 million will help more of those businesses to buy new equipment and invest in the plant in their factories. I welcome that measure, which will help not just those manufacturing businesses, but the huge number of businesses up and down the country that produce that machinery and the workforces in those industries, which are so valued up and down the country.

6.30 pm

**Rachel Maclean:** Does my hon. Friend agree that when we are talking about support for businesses, through entrepreneurs’ relief and all these other measures, we are talking not just about the people who own those businesses, but about the people working in them who have a job because of these measures?

**Jack Brereton:** Absolutely, and we want to see the number of those workers and the opportunities and jobs in those industries continue to grow. That is why it is so shocking to hear views from the Opposition that would damage the jobs miracle that we have seen over the last few years in this country.

Wages are rising, inflation is stable, unemployment has been so low for so long that the Office for Budget Responsibility believes that the equilibrium rate has fallen, income inequality is down and disposable income is up. This is the extraordinary record of making work pay. It is a huge economic success story, after the financial meltdown that the Labour party presided over. I want to see the success continue, and I know that to do so this House must support the Bill. I shall continue to do so, not least because of the concrete measures it contains for putting money in the pockets of Stoke-on-Trent’s very many hard-working people.

**Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab):** I begin by reflecting on the purpose of our society—the purpose of our communities, locally and nationally. The great Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee said:

“No social system will bring us happiness, health and prosperity unless it is inspired by something greater than materialism.”

I agree with Clement Attlee. To me and many others in this House, the aspiration is to create and be part of a community and society that cares for one another and
enables everyone to succeed in life, in whatever form success takes—a society that is safe and secure from cradle to grave and that provides accessible healthcare, quality housing, outstanding education and secure employment. A Government’s ultimate goal should be the wellbeing of its citizens, and there is much evidence to suggest that higher levels of wellbeing can lead to higher levels of job performance and productivity and greater job satisfaction. That is the society I want to live in.

Unfortunately, to say that that is not a reality under the current Government is an understatement. This Finance Bill does nothing to deliver the people of this country’s wellbeing. On new clause 2, a UN report just last week told us that the Government have inflicted “great misery” on our people, with “punitive, mean-spirited and often callous” austerity policies, driven by a political desire to undertake social re-engineering rather than by economic necessity. This is from the United Nations poverty envoy. We are told that levels of child poverty are “not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and economic disaster”.

The Budget was an opportunity to make some attempt to right those wrongs. Did it offer full and fair funding for our teachers and education service? No. Did it offer reassurance for those suffering the consequences of the cruel and callous roll-out of universal credit? No. Did it attempt to put an end to the causes of homelessness and destitution? No. Did it commit to funding our police services to help halt the massive increase in violent crime? No. Did it commit to funding our local councils, suffering 50% cuts, which are damaging the very fabric of our society? No. Did it do anything to relieve the hardship felt by so many women across our country? No.

Some 14 million of our citizens—our people; a fifth of the population—are living in poverty. One and a half million are destitute, with no money for even basic essentials. Up to 40% of children will be living in poverty by 2022. This Finance Bill is about lip service and rhetoric—pretending to care about the poor and vulnerable, but doing nothing substantial to address the misery and suffering felt by so many in our society. There is so much poverty and inequality in our country, and our country has never been more miserably divided—divided geographically, generationally and economically. We have poverty in our cities, towns and villages, but under this Government there is a poverty of compassion, a poverty of empathy and a poverty of insight into what real, ordinary people’s lives are like.

My mum said to me a few years before her death, having lived through the depression in the 1930s and survived the Manchester blitz in the second world war: “I’m glad I’m at the end of my life and not at the start when I look at what this Government are doing to our society. They’re punishing people for being poor”. Enough now. The people of this country have had enough. Labour will keep up the pressure and fight for those who are stuck in poor-quality housing, those who are struggling to feed their families and those who are not yet old enough to understand what poverty is and how it may impact their life. They deserve better.

I would like to finish with a quotation from the philosopher Thomas Paine:

“It is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry.”

It is interesting that the Government are currently facing so many questions and inquiries, both within this House and beyond.

**Alex Burghart:** It is an honour to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker).

One of the most striking things about the Chancellor’s Budget speech was the moment in history that it reflected. As the Committee will know, in 2010 the Government—the coalition Government, as then was—inaugurated the largest peacetime deficit in our history, yet the Chancellor was able to stand at the Dispatch Box and say that the deficit had fallen by four fifths, from just under 10% to 1.9%, and that it would be less than 1% by 2023-24. This is an extraordinary achievement, not of this House or even this Government, but of the British people, who, yes, have had to cut their cloth to make it happen. However, it has been an essential task, yet sometimes, listening to some hon. Members, we can be led to believe that it could have been wished away, that it did not matter or that it was something that the Conservative party invented.

But that is not so. The deficit is a real, serious thing. The deficit is the debt that we pass on to our children and to our children’s children. It is the debt that we have not cleared ourselves. We have a responsibility to the future. We have a responsibility to pass on a natural environment that is not polluted and we have a duty to pass on an economy that is not polluted.

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** I am listening to my hon. Friend’s opening remarks with great interest. He is right to talk about the importance of tackling the deficit, yet we sometimes hear comments from the Opposition about debt going up. If they are so concerned about the level of debt, can he confirm to me how many deficit reduction measures he believes they have supported?

**Alex Burghart:** I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I believe that the answer to his question is none, but I stand to be corrected.

Alongside the Budget, we heard the remarkable news last week that wage growth is at its highest level for a decade. That welcome return to growth benefits people in my constituency and around the country. In addition, we have the best employment figures in my lifetime. Sometimes, we are given the impression that such figures are idle statistics that mean nothing—that the Government are just chirruping on about that silly little thing, employment—but employment is not a marginal thing. Employment is what gives our constituents the opportunity to work, to support their families, to play their part in society and to have independence and choice. It is the greatest gift that the economy can bestow.

I always enjoy Finance Bill debates, because I am a genuine fan of the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), I assure *Hansard* that I am not being sarcastic when I say that I genuinely enjoy his company and his speeches. Over the years we have shared in the House, we have enjoyed some debates on the Beatles, on Plutarch and on sausages. Today, I shall add to that list by picking him up on voodoo economics.

The hon. Gentleman has accused us of voodoo economics when it comes to reducing corporation tax and thus bringing greater revenue into the Exchequer. I encourage him, in the spirit of friendship, to go and talk to some of the businesses that have onshored to the UK to take advantage of our extraordinarily competitive corporation tax rates. That is why people are coming to
this country to do business. It is why they are choosing to raise revenue here and pay taxes here. That is good for them, it is good for our economy and it is good for the people who use our public services. I respectfully suggest that if anyone wants an example of voodoo economics, they should look to the attempt to dig up the dead and rotting corpse of socialism, reinvigorate it with magic spells and have it wandering the streets, looking to bring rack and ruin. We find real voodoo economics in the suggestion that it will cost nothing to renationalise a range of utilities and services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) has pointed out, it will not cost nothing; it will cost at least £176 billion. Contrary to what the shadow Chancellor says, it will not pay for itself. It will be paid for by British taxpayers.

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent speech. He is right to point out the voodoo economics surrounding the Labour party’s plan for nationalisation. As he has said, we are not simply talking about the fact that it will cost £176 billion across the whole country; if we divide that up per household, my constituents in Aldershot are deeply alarmed at the prospect of having people pay higher taxes. Reducing those taxes earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull was one of the great minds of the Roman senate, and I am sure that he believes that new clause 1 is virtuous. I am sure that he believes that new clause 1 is good for our economy and it is good for the poorest people in society more money in their pockets—money that benefits them and flows straight into the economy. I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for the home owning democracy. I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for the home owning democracy.

Alex Burghart: I suggest that if anyone wants an example of voodoo economics, they should look to the attempt to dig up the dead and rotting corpse of socialism, reinvigorate it with magic spells and have it wandering the streets, looking to bring rack and ruin. We find real voodoo economics in the suggestion that it will cost nothing to renationalise a range of utilities and services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) has pointed out, it will not cost nothing; it will cost at least £176 billion. Contrary to what the shadow Chancellor says, it will not pay for itself. It will be paid for by British taxpayers.

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent speech. He is right to point out the voodoo economics surrounding the Labour party’s plan for nationalisation. As he has said, we are not simply talking about the fact that it will cost £176 billion across the whole country; if we divide that up per household, my constituents in Aldershot are deeply alarmed at the prospect of having to pay £6,471 for this madness.

Alex Burghart: I would certainly take up the hon. Gentleman’s offer to talk about Cicero, but I am sure that he would be ruled out of order.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): For the sake of clarity, no—Cicero is always pertinent to everything.

Alex Burghart: Cicero, as the hon. Gentleman knows, was one of the great minds of the Roman senate, and I can say with full certainty what he would have made of new clause 1. He would have said that it was a waste of time. We can rely on the Treasury to keep us informed of all the ins and outs of Government policy. We do not need additional laws and additional bureaucracy to achieve that. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a great lover of reviews. We have sat in many Committees together over the years, and he has tabled amendments calling for review upon review, which Parliament has always, sadly, declined to accept.

Kevin Foster: I am very much enjoying my hon. Friend’s speech. Does he agree that many analyses must have been done in the Treasury between 1997 and 2010 about why it was sensible to keep the tax rates as they were? The highest earners now pay slightly more, in terms of percentage rate, than they did throughout most of Labour’s 13 years in government, except for the last couple of months. It is quite strange to hear Labour Members’ enthusiasm for this type of taxation now that they are in opposition.

Alex Burghart: As ever, my hon. Friend puts it extremely well. “Wise after the event” might be one of the Labour party’s mottos.

I am pleased to welcome, in clauses 41 and 42, further improvements to stamp duty to help more people to get on the housing ladder and buy the homes that they so richly deserve. Those measures will put more money into the system and encourage the building of more homes, to allow us to progress down the route of building what must be built for the home owning democracy.

Alongside that, I was pleased to see an additional £1.7 billion being put into universal credit, to give the poorest people in society more money in their pockets—money that benefits them and flows straight into the economy. I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who is not in her place, for her service as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. She did her job extremely well. It was under her leadership that a number of improvements were made to universal credit and this decision to put an additional £1.7 billion into the service was concluded. That Secretary of State bore her unfair share of personal criticism while she was in that job; the person rather than the issue was often played. Although I fully take on board the remarks made by the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) about the desire of that great Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee for a caring society, when I have seen and heard some of the slander thrown at my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton, I have had to wonder whether all parts of the left are really as caring as Clement Attlee would have had them.

Rachel Maclean: Does my hon. Friend agree with Cicero on this point: when you have no basis for argument, you should abuse the plaintiff?
Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend quotes Cicero far better than I ever could, and I regret only that she did not do so in the original Latin—we can hope for such things next time.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am not going to quote Cicero, although I am perfectly able to do so, but I think the debate needs to progress as it should do. Is the cut in stamp duty, particularly for shared ownership schemes, going to have a major impact? Has my hon. Friend done any assessment of how much that is going to affect the people who are trying so desperately hard to get on to the housing ladder in his constituency and in mine? Does he have anything to support this argument?

Alex Burghart: I have no doubt that a cut in stamp duty will help homebuyers across the country, in my hon. Friend’s constituency and in mine. I am lucky to represent a constituency in Essex, near London. Our area has much to recommend it, but the price of housing is high. We are going through a programme of home building, reflecting the Government’s broader ambitions. I know from knocking on doors and speaking to young people and their parents that it is difficult to get on to that housing ladder. Every incremental improvement that this Government can make on things such as stamp duty helps to make the dream of home ownership a reality for those young people and their families.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): On my hon. Friend’s point about incrementalism, does he recognise that the welcome cut in stamp duty for first-time buyers comes on top of ending the crazy slab-based system of stamp duty land tax which was built up under Gordon Brown? That was a great reform. It has made stamp duty not only fairer, but much more sensible for anyone seeking to buy a property.

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend is too modest; I know not only that it was an excellent reform brought about under a Conservative Administration, where we went from the LEGO building-block approach to stamp duty that he described to something much smoother and more pristine, but that he was working in the Treasury at the time and was instrumental in bringing about that excellent reform. It has made stamp duty not only fairer, but much more sensible for anyone seeking to buy a property.

Let me turn to business, clause 38 and the necessary additional relief being given to entrepreneurs. As a number of hon. Members have made clear, these are people who are looking to start businesses, so as to employ people, and to create an economic dynamism in their communities and their areas. I go back to remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) about how he has seen employment and business growth in his area. I was having a conversation earlier with another hon. Friend from the north-east, where the Conservatives again have seats in Parliament—that is no accident. We have seats in Parliament in the north-east because of the record levels of jobs growth and business growth that have happened in those constituencies since 2010. Voters understand success and successful policies when they see them, which is why people such as my hon. Friend are capable of winning seats such as Stoke-on-Trent South. This happened because of the enormous benefits of Conservative policy since 2010.

A measure in the Budget that has meant a great deal to my area has been the substantial improvement in business rates. As I say, Brentwood and Ongar is a hive of Thatcherite prosperity. It has a huge number of small, medium-sized and large enterprises within its boundaries, most of which have been built by the sweat of local people, and are the product of good, old-fashioned British graft and nous. People in my area are proud of their high streets and want to see them do well. They want their local retail areas to be bustling and thriving. These measures are an enormous shot in the arm for those smaller businesses, which add not only vibrancy and character, but employment and economic opportunity to our local areas. I cannot praise them highly enough.

In conclusion, this is a Budget to help the people who drive the economy. It is a Budget for the businesses that help drive the economy. It offers dynamism to the economy. It will help deliver the growth we need to grow our revenues and our public services, and offer a future for our children which has jobs and is not shackled by an enormous debt left by the previous Government.

Ruth George: With such disagreement on statistics between hon. Members on both sides of the House, it would be helpful to refer to an impartial observer from the United Nations who has spent the past two weeks going across the United Kingdom and looking at our levels of poverty and the associated political choices. It is a damning indictment of not just our country but our Government that he concluded:

“The experience of the United Kingdom, especially since 2010, underscores the conclusion that poverty is a political choice. Austerity could easily have spared the poor, if the political will had existed to do so. Resources were available to the Treasury at the last budget that could have transformed the situation of millions of people living in poverty, but the political choice was made to fund tax cuts for the wealthy instead.”

I find that absolutely shocking in this day and age, given that there is so much evidence on this, not just from the likes of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, but in every region and on every street in our country. I live in a relatively affluent constituency, but I have had thousands of constituents come to me suffering from poverty.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning this, because the rapporteur came to my constituency last week and I sat through a harrowing three hours listening to the testimonies of people who are really in need and suffering. So I am genuinely grateful to her for raising this issue now.

7 pm

Ruth George: I find it hard to believe that any of us, as Members of Parliament who are seen to be compassionate and caring people who represent our constituents, do not have struggling constituents coming to them. A single parent came to me who has had to give up his job because his child is disabled. He has found that he is going to lose the disability element of child tax credit and will be £1,500 a year worse off. He said, “This Government says that it will protect the most vulnerable in society. If they cannot protect disabled children, who is more vulnerable? Who are these people that they claim to be protecting?” Answers are there none.

As I said, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that since 2015, the overall impact of tax and benefit reforms has hit the poorest two thirds of the population. They are the ones who have lost out—the poorest have
The previous speaker, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), praised the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey). Admittedly, she argued for Budget redistribution to people on universal credit, but the increase in the work allowance gives £630 a year to 2.4 million families. That will not make anyone better off: 3.2 million families were due to lose an average of £2,500 a year; now, those families will lose an average of £2,100 a year. The Budget will not make those people better off; it will make them very slightly less worse off.

When 14 million people—a fifth of the population—are in poverty, what do the Government have to say to them? What do they have to say to the 4 million people who live 50% below the poverty line, or to the 1.5 million who are destitute? Are they proud of those figures? Are they proud to meet people like my constituent Billy, who is doing his best and to do what the Government have asked him to do—go out and get a job—but people like him are punished for it.

When 8 million working people are in poverty, that is not a benefit to them. Two thirds of children living in poverty are in working households. Does the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar think that their parents’ employment is a gift? These children are still in poverty. Employment is a benefit only where it can lift a household and children out of poverty.

Alex Burghart: I fully respect the hon. Lady’s position on welfare—I often think it is a gift to the Government that she does not serve on the Front Bench—but it is slightly absurd to suggest that people are not better off in work. They are better off in work. We would all like people to earn more money in work, but to suggest, as Opposition Members often do, that work is no benefit to them, to earn more money in work, but to suggest, as Opposition Members often do, that work is no benefit to them. We would all like people to do—go out and get a job—but people like him are punished for it.

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Ruth George: I am afraid that for constituents like mine, about whom I was speaking earlier, work is not a route out of poverty. For them, trying a temporary job and moving into work is a fast route on to universal credit and into absolute poverty.

In spite of all the promises made to the House when cuts to universal credit were forced through after the 2015 Budget, not everyone will be protected as they move from legacy benefits to universal credit. Not even half the people who transfer from legacy benefits to universal credit will be protected from the average £2,100 worth of cuts. Managed migration has been delayed and reduced, and the criteria for transferring people from legacy benefits to universal credit have been widened so much that 4 million people will move on to universal credit naturally, with no protection whatsoever. Fewer than 3 million people will move over under managed migration. That is contrary to the promises that were made to the House when those cuts were brought in.

Some absolute anomalies in universal credit will seriously increase the amount of child poverty, which is why at the very least the Government have a duty to measure the impact of the provisions in their Budget. Some 3.2 million children are due to be affected by the two-child limit, and 1.4 million of those children live in families with four children or more, who will lose an average of £7,000 a year. That is a huge amount of money, which no family with children can afford to lose, much less the poorest and those households bringing up children on such low incomes. According to the Office for Budget Responsibility, £3.2 billion will be taken off people with disabilities by 2023.

What about the self-employed? The Government claim to support entrepreneurship, but their entrepreneurs’ relief enables 6,000 people making profits of more than £1 million on the sale of their business to benefit by an average of almost half a million pounds each. That costs this country and its economy £2.7 billion. People starting out in self-employment, on low earnings, such as my constituent Billy, are among the 430,000 who will lose an average of £3,000 a year, mostly because of the minimum income floor.

Neil O’Brien: Is the hon. Lady calling for entrepreneurs’ relief to be completely scrapped?

Ruth George: I believe that the relief should be reviewed, which is what new clause 3 would require. We could then see its impact on the most well off and on the poorest, and in particular its impact among those who aspire to be entrepreneurs and who aspire to bring themselves out of—

Neil O’Brien: So you don’t know.

Ruth George: That is what the new clause would require. If the Government wanted us to abolish entrepreneurs’ relief and had given us a Finance Bill that we could actually amend, and if they had the courage to put their policies to votes on the Floor of the House and to give us any alternative, other than to amend the Bill to require reviews, we would gladly do so. Perhaps the Minister could indicate from his sedentary position whether he is prepared to allow the Committee to make such an amendment to abolish entrepreneurs’ relief.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride) rose—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It is not for the hon. Lady to ask questions of the Minister at this point. When the Minister is speaking, she might wish to try to intervene at that point, but she cannot require the Minister to answer her question at this point. She can
expect him to answer it when he addresses the Committee later. Having said that, if the Minister wishes to jump up at this point, I will not stop him. It is an interesting matter.

Mel Stride: I was just going to say that, as the hon. Lady will know, all amendments need to be in scope and that that is ultimately a decision for Mr Speaker. I am sure that he has taken the appropriate decisions in this case—[Interruption.]

Ruth George: My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has just said from a sedentary position that the Government have set the parameters for the scope of amendments in this Bill. The same happened with the previous two Finance Bills that they brought to the House. They have not allowed any substantive amendments to the Bill. They will not allow their policies to be tested on the Floor of the House, because those policies have been found wanting in terms of redistribution of wealth from the best off in our society to the poorest. It is actually the poorest who pay 42% of their income, while the richest pay just 34%. How is that fair?

This Budget has done nothing to support the poorest people. After raising VAT to 20%, the Government have doubled insurance tax and are raising council tax across the country by 5% a year, hitting the poorest in our society and hitting those who can afford it the least. They are also hitting those who are homeowners with universal credit. We have heard that the Government aspire to support homeowners, so why is it that, under universal credit, 74% of people who lose out are actually homeowners? They have seen their clawback of income nearly doubling from 39% under the Labour Government to 63% under this Government, and it is going up to 75% for taxpayers.

If the Government disagree with our analysis that this Budget is not helping people in poverty and that it is actually entrenching the serious divides and the serious destitution and poverty within our society, they should prove their case by supporting our amendment for an equalities impact assessment. But they have form on proving their case by supporting our amendment for an equalities impact assessment. But they have form on proving their case by supporting our amendment for an equalities impact assessment.

Peter Dowd: The actual author of that article called the Prime Minister a word that would be unparliamentary if that is what he said. He called her that particular word. If the author is calling the Prime Minister a particular word, should the hon. Lady not accept the fact that the author did not say that?

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is rightly respecting parliamentary language. Rather than refer to language that is unparliamentary, if he simply wants to say that the alleged author of those alleged words denies them, he is at liberty to do so.

Peter Dowd: Thank you very much, Dame Eleanor. That is precisely what I wanted to say.

7.15 pm

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I fear that we are getting bogged down and dragged into areas that I do not wish to go into, given that I do not have very much time. I merely wish to make the point that Labour’s record demonstrates its disregard for managing public finances responsibly. What it also does, as we have heard from Members, particularly from those on the shadow Front Bench, is help us to see their approach to entrepreneurs—those people who sacrifice and work, sometimes for decades, to start businesses. They seek to attack and punish those people who often put their lives on the line and who often take considerable sacrifices to start businesses. Those entrepreneurs up and down the country may not be paying themselves for many, many years because they have to meet the payroll of their workers. We see the approach from the Opposition to those people. We are talking about entrepreneurs’ relief that will come to fruition only when that entrepreneur wishes to sell or dispose of part of a business that may have lasted over a lifetime during which they have paid tax, contributed to our economy and created jobs.

Peter Dowd rose—

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry, but as much as I enjoy debating with the hon. Gentleman, I will not take any more interventions because I do not have much time and I have taken one already.

We have heard a lot of philosophy tonight. I will not quote Cicero again, but I will draw the House’s attention to the Jewish philosopher Maimonides who said more than 2,000 years ago that the greatest form of social justice and charity is to start a business and to create jobs. Therefore, I reject the Opposition’s amendment on the entrepreneurs’ relief. However, we should definitely keep it under review, and I am absolutely sure that the Treasury will do so because we on the Government Benches want to ensure value for taxpayers’ money in all the things that we do. We recognise that we are spending not the Government’s money, but our constituents’ money, and we need to do that carefully.

I now wish to address the movement on the tax thresholds, because this relates to a fundamental Conservative value.

John Howell: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry but I will not give way. I only have a couple of minutes left. Please forgive me.
The movement on the tax thresholds is a fundamental point at the heart of our Conservative philosophy, which is freedom of the individual to spend their own hard-earned money how they wish. What this Budget and this Finance Bill are doing is taking people out of tax. A basic rate taxpayer will pay £1,205 a year less than in 2010, when Labour left office, and that is, effectively, a pay rise for those people, leaving them with more money in their pockets.

Let me say this to the Opposition: they often talk about how they want people to pay more tax. Well, people are free to pay more tax voluntarily, but, surprisingly enough, that is not often what people do. What we do see as a result of our tax policy of lowering tax rates is a greater tax take coming into the Exchequer. We see that fundamental principle illustrated time and again because of the policies advocated and enacted by the Government. It is right to lower the tax thresholds for low and middle-income earners. In fact, the shadow Chancellor and the shadow Chief Secretary do not even oppose that; they agree that we should keep those tax thresholds low. We need look no further than corporation tax, as those receipts are up 50% to £53.6 billion because of the lowering of the rate that has happened under this Government. That is £53.6 billion more for this Government to spend on strong public services up and down the country.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Surely, the hon. Lady is aware that just about every analysis that has been done regarding the reason for the increase in corporation tax revenue says that it is due not to the reduction in rates, but to factors such as the banks’ return to profitability after the financial crisis, so it is not right to link the two.

Rachel Maclean: I do not accept those comments because we have seen new businesses in my constituency and in the constituencies of many other hon. Members. In Redditch, we have record rates of business start-ups because of measures in this Budget, this Finance Bill and other Budgets. I am a great supporter of the Bill because it will drive more revenue into the Exchequer that I would like to see spent on strong public services in Redditch.

Mel Stride: May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Eleanor?

Let me first pick up on some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), speaking from the Scottish National party Front Bench. She raised the issue of the higher rate threshold in clause 5 and asked whether the Bill might be organised in a slightly different manner. The most important thing is that we have put forward the information in a simple and straightforward way. As I am sure she is aware, the rise to the basic rate limit is dealt with in clause 5(1), with the amendment to £37,500 in the Income Tax Act 2007. That of course gets added to the personal allowance. The higher rate threshold is UK-wide for both dividends and savings income, which is what the amendment to the Income Tax Act deals with and focuses on.

Clause 5(2), Dame Eleanor—as I know you and other Members of the House will be aware, having read this Bill in significant detail—deals with the rise in the personal allowance to £12,500, which once again is a UK-wide scope. Therefore, it is appropriate that it is in a clause that is not subject to the provisions of English votes for English laws.

Clause 5(4)—I notice the hon. Member for Aberdeen North looking at this quite closely—also breaks the link between the personal allowance and the national minimum wage, which is once again a UK-wide measure. On the hon. Lady’s very specific point, it is appropriate that all these measures are contained within one clause.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the national minimum wage and the level at which it is set for those aged 16 to 24. She will know that a review is currently being conducted by the Low Pay Commission, which will report in spring 2019, although the commission has said in the past that increases up towards the level of the national living wage—which is what I think the hon. Lady is seeking—may have a detrimental impact on the level of employment. Of course, this Government have overseen a halving of the level of youth unemployment since 2010, something of which we are justly proud.

The hon. Lady brought up the issue of raising the personal allowance to £12,750, in line with her party’s new clause 19. The important point is that we have been able to raise the personal allowance from around £6,500 in 2010 right the way up to £12,500, taking about 4 million of the lowest paid out of tax altogether. That comes at huge cost, and the estimated cost of going still further, to the level that hon. Lady suggests, would be of the order of £1.5 billion. For that reason, we believe that the very significant rise that we have put in place is proportionate and should be welcomed by many of the lowest income earners, whom the hon. Lady quite rightly seeks to protect.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of poverty, as did a number of other hon. and right hon. Members. I remind the Committee that there are 1 million fewer people living in absolute poverty than in 2010, including 300,000 children. It is also the case that there are two thirds of a million fewer children living in workless households. We have heard a great deal about the importance of employment and our record on employment, with virtually the highest level of employment in our history and the lowest level of unemployment since the mid-1970s. Work is a very important route out of poverty and we have a strong record in that respect.

A number of Members mentioned entrepreneurs’ relief. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North suggested that the shift from the one-year to the two-year qualifying condition might actually impose a hurdle to entrepreneurship—I think that was the expression she used—but we see it as important that we at least have entrepreneurs who are not in and out within a period of 12 months, but who are actually there for the longer term. Of course, the Labour party seems to be entirely hostile to the whole notion of an entrepreneurs’ relief, which is not surprising given the general approach it seems to take towards business.

John Howell: Will my right hon. Friend comment on the fact that entrepreneurs’ relief is aimed at securing longer-term investment? This country has been very used to short-term investment, but it has done nothing for us. We need people to invest in the longer term.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is exactly right. This is why we also have the enterprise investment scheme and the seed enterprise investment scheme, and why we have
made this change to entrepreneurs' relief. An interesting fact is that of those who benefit from the entrepreneurs' relief, around a third go on to reinvest in further businesses, so those tax savings are being reinvested in further economic activity.

I turn to the comments of the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who made a number of important points—or, should I say, he made a number of points about important matters? That might be slightly more to the point. However, I agree entirely with my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who is no longer in his place; I have a great affection for the shadow Minister, particularly the Plutarch and Cicero quotes of which he is most fond. In fact, I will share one with him that does not apply to him in any way, of course:

“No man can make mistakes, but only a fool persists in his error.”

I think that is probably more appropriate to the leader of his party than to the hon. Gentleman himself.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issues of the amount of tax burden shouldered by the wealthiest in the country. I remind him that under this Government the wealthiest 1% pay a full 28% of all income tax; it was about 24% when the Labour party was in power. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) pointed out, the lowest 20% of earners have benefited the most since 2010, from the combination of changes to tax, the national living wage and other factors.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the UN rapporteur and my appearance on Channel 4. I have to point out that the rapporteur produced, I think, a 24-page report based on around two weeks' fact-finding in this country. The Government's view is that the conclusions drawn were disproportionate to say the least. The hon. Gentleman suggested that I did not answer the questions put to me on that particular occasion, which I dispute. However, it is indisputable that he failed to answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) as to exactly what the Opposition would do with the personal allowance, given the exception that they are taking to our tax measures in the Budget.

Debbie Abrahams: Can the Minister recollect whether there has been a UN report in the last eight years that this Government have agreed with?

Mel Stride: Well, I am not here to debate UN reports of any description and whether the Government agree with them, other than to make the point that this particular report is rather disproportionate, given the remarks that I made earlier about what has happened to absolute poverty and children of workless households and so on.

7.30 pm

The Budget reported on the remarkable achievements of this Government and the British people in cleaning up the aftermath of the recession, with eight straight years of economic growth, over 3.3 million more people in work, regular wages growing at their fastest pace in almost a decade, an economy back on its feet again and austerity coming to an end. It is thanks to the hard work of the British people and this Government's careful management of the public finances that the Chancellor could set out a series of measures in the Budget to help families and businesses right across Britain. The clauses in this group legislate for some of those measures by cutting taxes, making it easier for first-time buyers to purchase a home and cheaper to switch to greener transport, and making the tax system for businesses and charities simpler and fairer.

At the heart of this Government's strategy on living standards is the principle that hard-working people should keep more of their money and that the best way to help families is to cut taxes, not raise them. Our record speaks for itself. When we came into office, the personal allowance was £6,475 and the higher rate threshold was £43,875. Last year, the Chancellor increased the two thresholds, and now this Government have gone all the way to £12,500 and £50,000 respectively, meeting our manifesto commitment. Clause 5 of the Bill delivers on that promise one year early, meaning that a typical basic rate taxpayer will pay £130 less in income tax in 2019-20 than this year, and meeting our manifesto commitment at the earliest affordable opportunity.

These changes mean that compared with 2015, we have cut taxes for 32 million people, over 1.7 million people will pay no income tax at all and nearly 1 million fewer people will pay the higher rate of income tax. As well as raising the thresholds a year early, clause 5 sets out how we will maintain our low-tax policy for the rest of this Parliament. We will keep the personal allowance and higher rate threshold at the same levels in 2020-21, meaning a tax cut in that year as well, with 32.3 million individuals paying less tax in 2020-21 compared with 2015-16.

Once the personal allowance reaches £12,500 next year, current legislation means that it will be linked to increases in the national minimum wage. That was intended to ensure that someone working 30 hours a week on the national minimum wage would not pay income tax, but in fact, increasing the personal allowance to £12,500 means that someone on the national minimum wage will already pay no income tax next year and will pay no income tax in every year of the forecast period. Clause 5 restores the link with indexation by the consumer prices index, meaning that the value of these allowances is not eroded by price increases over time and the value of the personal allowance continues to be higher than if we maintained the national minimum wage link.

Amendment 6 attempts to prevent that change. Making the personal allowance equal to the relevant national minimum wage for 2019-20 would mean that the personal allowance was actually lower than £12,500 in every year of the forecast period. I know that the SNP like to raise taxes—indeed, they have done so by exercising their newly devolved tax powers in Scotland—but I have no idea why they would wish to increase the tax burden in that way. To be fair, I am sure that that was not the intention behind the amendment, so I urge the Committee to resist it.

New clauses 1 and 19 would require the Government to publish a distributional analysis of the Opposition's income tax policy and of a £250 increase to the personal allowance. That is unnecessary. This Government are more transparent than any other, publishing a detailed distributional analysis at Budget 2018. We do not need further analysis to know that the Opposition's proposals would be an inefficient, economically distortive way to try to raise revenue by raising taxes for over 1.5 million people.
The impact of the Opposition’s income tax policy is immediately obvious to anyone with even a rudimentary grasp of economics. Squeezing tax rates and lower thresholds would raise taxes on millions of people, harming wealth creation and making the UK a less competitive country. The Labour party’s draconian plans would drive away investment and erode our ability to raise revenue to fund our vital public services. Their plans would also destroy jobs, as every Labour Government in history have done—[Interruption.] I know that the hon. Member for Bootle will remind me of Ramsay MacDonald in 1924, but it was a minority Labour Government, and rather a long time ago.

Further analysis of increasing the personal allowance by £250 is also unnecessary. The Government could increase the personal allowance to £12,500 a year earlier than planned only because of our careful management of the public finances. Raising the personal allowance by a further £250 would cost an estimated £1.5 billion, in addition to the £2.8 billion that we are already spending in 2019-20 on lowering the burden of taxation on more than 32 million people. We do not need further analysis of a policy that is unaffordable in the context of our balanced fiscal approach. I therefore hope that Members will not press the new clauses to a vote.

New clauses 2 and 18 would require the Government to provide analysis of the impact of clause 5 on a range of different protected characteristics and health impacts. As I have stated, the Government have been completely transparent. We published a detailed distributional analysis at Budget 2018, which shows that the poorest households have gained the most as a percentage of net income since this Chancellor and Prime Minister took office. The Government carefully consider the impact of their decisions on those sharing protected characteristics, in line with our legal obligations and our strong commitment to promoting fairness.

As well as cutting income tax, the Bill takes further steps to help with the cost of living, making it easier to get on the property ladder. The last Finance Act permanently abolished stamp duty land tax for many first-time buyers. From its introduction until June 2018, the relief has been claimed on 121,500 property transactions, with an average saving of £2,300 per transaction. The changes made by clause 41 will allow those paying SDLT in stages, such as through shared ownership schemes, to claim first-time buyers’ relief. Previously, only those who elected to pay their SDLT on the whole market value of the property could do so.

The tax system should back hard-working people to switch to all-electric and plug-in hybrid cars, paving the way for an economy fit for the future. Clause 8 delivers on that. Clause 9 will ensure that police officers, firefighters and ambulance crews are not unintentionally subject to a tax charge on the private use of their emergency vehicles.

New clause 8 would require HMRC to publish a report into the geographical effects of clause 9, but clause 9 will be applied in the same way across the United Kingdom, so there is no need for that.

I want to leave a minute for the hon. Member for Aberdeen North to speak, so I will conclude. The clauses that we have debated today deliver on this Government’s commitment to cut red tape, to deliver effective tax relief and to cut taxes for over 32 million hard-working people—a commitment to cut taxes that stands in stark contrast to the reckless hikes proposed by the Labour party. Their plans are laid bare by their proposed amendments to the Bill, which place an ocean of true blue water between our drive to get tax down and theirs to let it rip. Of course, Labour will say, as they have in this debate, that only the wealthy will pay and that the ordinary taxpayer will be left alone, but their plans will see 1.5 million people clobbered, including headteachers, consultants in our health service and the great creators of enterprise and wealth from whom we all benefit.

We know the age-old truth, that Labour will not stop there. Their recklessness would consume far more than they profess. Just like their predecessors, they will not stop with the so-called privileged few. In time, they will widen the net, broaden the base and drag more and more into punitive taxation to feed the habit of the wanton and the insatiable. Labour’s true message to the millions of hard-working people up and down our United Kingdom is that in the end, they will come not just for the better off; they will come for you. We will continue to stand up for hard-working families up and down our country, with plans that work and an economy that delivers. I commend these clauses to the Committee.

Kirsty Blackman: This has been an interesting and wide-ranging debate, although I cannot say that I share the enthusiasm of the First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing) for Cicero.

I want to pick up the comments of Government Members about hard-working people. They regularly use that term to mean people who are earning above the higher rate threshold, and it sounds as though they are saying that people who are on the minimum wage—people who are retail workers, hospitality workers, carers, cleaners—do not work hard, when in fact they do. They work incredibly hard, and our lives would not be the same if it were not for those people working incredibly hard on the minimum wage. We will push new clause 19 to a vote for that reason.

Lastly, I beg to ask to leave to withdraw amendment 6.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 292, Noes 10.

Division No. 258] [7.40 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Sir Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, rh Graham
Braveerman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brooks, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conan
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.
7.55 pm
More than three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Order, 12 November).

The Chair put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Clauses 6, 8 to 10 and 38 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 15 agreed to.

Clauses 39 to 42 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 1

**ADDITIONAL RATE THRESHOLD AND SUPPLEMENTARY RATE**

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, no later than 5 April 2019, lay before the House of Commons a distributional analysis of—

(a) the effect of reducing the threshold for the additional rate to £30,000; and

(b) the effect of introducing a supplementary rate of income tax, charged at a rate of 50%, above a threshold of £125,000.”—(Peter Dowd.)

Brought up.

**Question put,** That the clause be added to the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 262, Noes 293.

**Division No. 259**

**AYES**

Abbott, Mr Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amess, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, r Sir Kevin
Beckett, Margaret
Benn, r Sir Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Mr Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, Mr Rh Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, r Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, r Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glinson, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, r Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendy, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khaw, Alzal
Kileen, Gerd
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, r Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long-Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, r Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, r Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, r Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slatter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afzali, Bim
Afiyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brokershires, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon

Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
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
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammont, 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
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingsbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holoway, 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
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Laumont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Merrin, 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
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Pate, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 2

IMPACT OF PROVISIONS OF SECTION 5 ON CHILD POVERTY AND EQUALITY

(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of the provisions of section 5 and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider the impact of the changes made by section 5 on—

(a) households at different levels of income,
(b) people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010),
(c) the Treasury’s compliance with the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010,
(d) different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England, and
(e) levels of relative and absolute child poverty in the United Kingdom.

(3) In this section—

“parts of the United Kingdom” means—

(a) England,
(b) Scotland,
(c) Wales, and
(d) Northern Ireland;

“regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.’

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 287, Noes 292.

Division No. 260] [8.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
All, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazi, 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
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davies, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Doherity-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
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
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrar, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Girvan, Paul
Glinon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Tellers for the Ayes: Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Akins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Keri
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brady, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brookes, Sir James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burgarth, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cains, rh Alun
Carriage, James
Castlfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dover-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David

Noes
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evans, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
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
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hans, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddeleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Saajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
This new clause would require a distributional analysis of the effect of £12,750. "—[Kirsty Blackman.]"

This new clause would require a distributional analysis of the effect of increasing the personal allowance to £12,750.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The Committee divided: Ayes 34, Noes 290.

AYES

Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, r.h. Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Cherry, Jo
Cowen, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Edwards, Jonathan
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendy, Drew

Tellers for the Ayes: David Linden and Marion Fellows

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter

Tellers for the Noes: Michelle Donelan and Jo Churchill

Question accordingly negatived.
Antecedent to new clause 10.

This it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 69 to 77 stand part.

The Temporary Chairman (Sir George Howarth): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Clauses 69 to 77 stand part.

Amendment 10, in clause 78, page 51, line 32, after “subject to section (Review of expenditure implications of Part 3)”,

Antecedent to new clause 10.

Clause 78 stand part.
Amendment 14, in clause 89, page 66, line 30, at end insert—

“(1A) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, no later than the date provided for in subsection (1C), lay before the House of Commons a statement of the circumstances (in relation to the outcome of negotiations with the EU) that give rise to the exercise of the power.

(1B) The statement under subsection (1A) must be accompanied by—

(a) an assessment of the fiscal and economic effects of the exercise of those powers and the circumstances giving rise to them;
(b) a comparison of those fiscal and economic effects with the effects if—
   (i) a negotiated withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship with the EU had been agreed to, and
   (ii) the United Kingdom had remained a member of the European Union;
(c) a statement by the Office for Budget Responsibility on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the assessment under paragraph (a) and the comparison under paragraph (b).

(1C) The date provided for in this subsection is—

(a) a date which is no less than seven days before the date on which a Minister of the Crown proposes to make a motion for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union Withdrawal Act 2018 and after the passing of this Act, or
(b) a date which is no less than seven days before the date on which a Minister of the Crown proposes to make a motion for the purposes of section 13(6)(a) of the European Union Withdrawal Act 2018 and after the passing of this Act, or
(c) a date which is no less than seven days before the date on which a Minister of the Crown proposes to make a motion for the purposes of section 13(8)(b)(ii) of the European Union Withdrawal Act 2018 and after the passing of this Act, or
(d) the date on which this Act is passed, whichever is the earliest.”

This amendment requires the first use of the powers intended to modify tax legislation in the event of a no deal Brexit to be accompanied by a statement of the circumstances and a comparative analysis of their impact, accompanied by an OBR assessment.

Amendment 15, page 66, line 30, at end insert—

“(1A) No regulations under this section may be made until the Chancellor of the Exchequer has laid a statement before the House of Commons setting out—

(a) a list of the powers in relevant tax legislation that the Treasury has acquired since June 2016 in connection with the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union,
(b) a list of the powers in relevant tax legislation the Treasury expects to acquire if—
   (i) a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship with the European Union have been agreed to, or
   (ii) the United Kingdom has left the European Union without a negotiated withdrawal agreement.
(c) a description of any powers conferred upon the House of Commons (whether by means of the approval or annulment of statutory instruments or otherwise) in connection with the exercise of the powers set out in subsection (b).”

Amendment 22, page 66, line 30, at end insert—

“(1A) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, no later than a week after the passing of this Act and before exercising the power in subsection (1), lay before the House of Commons a review of the following matters—

(a) the fiscal and economic effects of the exercise of those powers and of the outcome of negotiations for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union giving rise to their exercise;
(b) a comparison of those fiscal and economic effects with the effects if a negotiated withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship with the EU had been agreed to;
(c) any differences in the exercise of those powers in respect of—
   (i) Great Britain, and
   (ii) Northern Ireland;
(d) any differential effects in relation to the matters specified in paragraphs (a) and (b) in relation between—
   (i) Great Britain, and
   (ii) Northern Ireland.”

Amendment 7, page 67, line 1, leave out subsection (5) and insert—

“(5) No statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may be made unless a draft has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.”

This amendment would make clause 89 (Minor amendments in consequence of EU withdrawal) subject to affirmative procedure.

Amendment 20, page 67, line 2, at end insert—

“(5A) No regulations may be made under this section unless the United Kingdom has left the European Union without a negotiated withdrawal agreement.”

Amendment 2, page 67, line 13, at end insert—

“(7) This section shall, subject to subsection (8), cease to have effect at the end of the period of two years beginning with the day on which this Act is passed.

(8) The Treasury may by regulations provide that this section shall continue in force for an additional period of up to three years from the end of the period specified in subsection (7).

(9) No regulations may be made under subsection (8) unless a draft has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.”

Clause 89 stand part.

Amendment 8, in clause 90, page 67, line 16, after “may”, insert—

“(subject to subsections (1A) and (1B))”

This amendment is antecedent to Amendment 9.

Amendment 9, page 67, line 18, at end insert—

“(1A) Before proposing to incur expenditure under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must lay before the House of Commons—

(a) a statement of the circumstances (in relation to negotiations relating to the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union) that give rise to the need for such preparatory expenditure, and
(b) an estimate of the expenditure to be incurred.

(1B) No expenditure may be incurred under subsection (1) unless the House of Commons comes to a resolution that it has considered the statement and estimate under subsection (1A) and approves the proposed expenditure.”

This amendment would require a statement on circumstances (in relation to negotiations) giving rise to the need for, as well as an estimate of the cost of, preparatory expenditure to introduce a charging scheme for greenhouse gas allowances. The amendment would require a Commons resolution before expenditure could be incurred.

Clause 90 stand part.

New clause 10—Review of expenditure implications of Part 3—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the expenditure implications of commencing Part 3 of this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.
(2) No regulations may be made by the Commissioners under section 78(1) unless the review under subsection (1) has been laid before the House of Commons.

This new clause would require a review within 6 months of the expenditure implications of introducing a carbon emissions tax. It would prevent Part 3 coming into effect until such a review had been laid before the House of Commons.

New clause 11—Report on consultation on certain provisions of this Act (No. 2)

“(1) No later than two months after the passing of this Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report on the consultation undertaken on the provisions in subsection (2).

(2) Those provisions are—

(a) sections 68 to 78,

(b) section 89, and

(c) section 90.

(3) A report under this section must specify in respect of each provision listed in subsection (2)—

(a) whether a version of the provision was published in draft,

(b) if so, whether changes were made as a result of consultation on the draft,

(c) if not, the reasons why the provision was not published in draft and any consultation which took place on the proposed provision in the absence of such a draft.”

This new clause would require a report on the consultation undertaken on certain provisions of this Act—alongside new clauses 9, 13 and 15.

New clause 17—Review of the carbon emissions tax (No. 2)

“Within twelve months of the commencement of Part 3 of the Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the carbon emissions tax to determine—

(a) the effect of the carbon emissions tax on the United Kingdom’s carbon price in the context of non-participation in the European Union emissions trading scheme, and

(b) the effect of the carbon emissions tax on the United Kingdom’s ability to comply with its fourth and fifth carbon budgets.”

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick):

In these parts of the Bill, we make sensible preparations for our exit from the European Union. While right hon. and hon. Members across the House may well disagree on Brexit, I would hope that all would wish to see us undertake on certain provisions of this Act—alongside new clauses 9, 13 and 15.

New clause 11—Report on consultation on certain provisions of this Act (No. 2)

“(1) No later than two months after the passing of this Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report on the consultation undertaken on the provisions in subsection (2).

(2) Those provisions are—

(a) sections 68 to 78,

(b) section 89, and

(c) section 90.

(3) A report under this section must specify in respect of each provision listed in subsection (2)—

(a) whether a version of the provision was published in draft,

(b) if so, whether changes were made as a result of consultation on the draft,

(c) if not, the reasons why the provision was not published in draft and any consultation which took place on the proposed provision in the absence of such a draft.”

This new clause would require a report on the consultation undertaken on certain provisions of this Act—alongside new clauses 9, 13 and 15.

New clause 17—Review of the carbon emissions tax (No. 2)

“Within twelve months of the commencement of Part 3 of the Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the carbon emissions tax to determine—

(a) the effect of the carbon emissions tax on the United Kingdom’s carbon price in the context of non-participation in the European Union emissions trading scheme, and

(b) the effect of the carbon emissions tax on the United Kingdom’s ability to comply with its fourth and fifth carbon budgets.”

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick):

In these parts of the Bill, we make sensible preparations for our exit from the European Union. While right hon. and hon. Members across the House may well disagree on Brexit, I would hope that all would wish to see us prepare as carefully as possible so that we can maintain the stability of the tax system; provide as much certainty for the taxpayer as possible; in respect of carbon pricing, meet our commitments to the environment; and do all those things in all eventualities, including in the event of no deal, which is clearly not the Government’s preference but remains a possibility.

At Budget, the Government announced essential provisions to ensure that the tax system can continue to function in any outcome.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Minister talks about preparations for no deal. In the OBR’s “Blue Book”, it quoted assessments made by economists who suggested that the economy had already shrunk by between 2% and 2.5% since the referendum, and the Library has suggested that that has cost the UK economy anywhere between £40 billion and £50 billion. Does he agree with that assessment, and what work has been going on in the Treasury to account for it?

Robert Jenrick: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that the economy has been growing for eight years—for five years, in every successive quarter. Unemployment is at its lowest rate in my lifetime and employment is at its highest. The British economy is sound and robust, and that is exactly why in the Budget the Chancellor was able to make the tax cuts for 32 million of our citizens and the increased spending on the NHS.

Neil Gray rose—

Robert Jenrick: I will not give way again at this stage, but I could come back to the hon. Gentleman later.

The changes that we have outlined in these clauses will, I hope, signal that the UK is committed to maintaining stability and certainty for taxpayers and for businesses across the economy, especially in respect of the environmental tax provisions that I will talk about in a moment. Clauses 69 to 78 will allow the Government to introduce a carbon emissions tax to replace the EU emissions trading scheme—the ETS—in the event of no deal. Clause 90 will allow for essential preparatory expenditure to begin work on a domestic emissions trading scheme in the event that one is required. Clause 89 will introduce a power to make minor technical amendments to UK tax legislation—essential for maintaining the continued effect of the tax system.

Let me turn first to clauses 68 to 78 with respect to the carbon emissions tax. These clauses will take effect only if the UK leaves the European Union in 2019 without a deal. The clauses will give the Government the power to introduce a no-deal carbon emissions tax. The rate for 2019 would be set at £16 per tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent, and the tax would cover the same electricity generators and industrial businesses that currently participate in the EU ETS. The tax would provide the same protections against carbon leakage as the EU ETS. Operators would pay the tax only on emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases emitted above an allowance set for each installation in advance of the tax year. This is in line with the EU ETS system of free emissions allowances.

In effect, the carbon emissions tax would seek initially to replicate the effects of the EU ETS as closely as possible, in the event of no agreement. This is important, as I hope hon. Members in all parts of the House will agree, for two reasons: first, because we want to provide certainty for businesses and for the energy industry to enable them to make investment and business decisions with confidence, as the industry has asked us to do; and secondly, because maintaining a carbon price is a key component of meeting our legally binding climate change commitments.

8.45 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister accept that now that the Government have greater freedom of operation, this is fairly timid? We have an emissions crisis in this country, as we do across the rest of the world. Why are the Government not being more ambitious in trying to bear down on emissions, as seen in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report?

Robert Jenrick: I appreciate the point the hon. Gentleman makes, but perhaps he has missed the argument I have tried to make, which is that this is not prejudging the
[Robert Jenrick]

later outcome of how we should handle our carbon pricing as we leave the EU; it is trying to ensure that in the unlikely event, which the Government wish to avoid, of a no-deal Brexit we can maintain the system as close as possible to the present one. We chose the price of £16 because that is broadly the same as where the EU’s floating price has been in recent months. Of course the price has floated very widely from as low as £6 to as high as over £20, so making that assessment is not a precise exercise, but we believe that £16 is a reasonable figure to maintain stability, and that seems to have been well received by the industry and environmental groups.

Clause 90 is about preparatory expenditure. Alongside preparing for no deal, the Government are developing long-term alternatives to the EU emissions trading scheme. As set out already in the outline political declaration on the future relationship between the EU and the UK, we are considering options for co-operation on carbon pricing, including, if possible, linking a UK national greenhouse gas emissions trading system with the EU ETS. Clause 90 will allow Departments to begin preparatory expenditure on a UK ETS, which is included in the Bill, to prepare for a linked or unlinked domestic trading scheme. It does not mean, as I said earlier, that a final decision has been made as to which option to implement, but it does ensure that all the options are kept open and we can proceed with the kind of planning that one would expect.

I shall now turn briefly to amendments 8, 9 and 10 and new clause 10 tabled by the SNP. Amendments 8 and 9 propose that the Government must table a statement on the circumstances that require expenditure in the case of clause 90 and an estimate of the expenditure to be incurred and that the House would come to a resolution to approve that expenditure. New clause 10 and amendment 10 would require the Chancellor to review the expenditure implications of the carbon emissions tax and lay a report of that review before the House within six months of the passing of the Bill, and no regulations could be made by the commissioners unless that had taken place.

A statement of circumstances, as required by amendments 8 and 9, is in our opinion unnecessary. We are legislating because the UK is leaving the EU, and as part of that we have to prepare a domestic ETS, as mentioned in the outline political declaration, and for a carbon emissions tax only in the event of no deal.

More importantly, with all these amendments, the Finance Bill is not and has never been the place for detailed questions of expenditure. The Finance Bill is primarily a Bill about tax. Parliament gets other opportunities to review and vote on departmental expenditure, and if that is important to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), I suggest that she direct her scrutiny to the estimates process when it arises in due course.

New clause 17 would require the Chancellor to review the carbon emissions tax to determine its effect on the UK carbon price and the UK’s ability to comply with its fourth and fifth carbon budgets. We are confident that the carbon emissions tax would be similarly effective to the EU ETS, and I can assure Members that there are already robust requirements to report on progress towards the UK’s emissions reductions targets. For example, the Climate Change Act 2008 provides a world-leading governance framework that we certainly support. First, it ensures that the Government are required to prepare and lay before Parliament an annual statement of emissions, setting out the total amount of greenhouse gases emitted, and removed from, the atmosphere across the UK and the steps taken to calculate the net UK carbon accounts. Secondly, the independent Committee on Climate Change is required to prepare and lay before Parliament an annual report on the Government’s progress towards meeting the UK’s carbon budgets, which the Government are required to respond to. Thirdly, the Government are required to prepare and lay before Parliament a statement setting out performance against each carbon budget period and the 2050 target. We believe that, taken together, these are strong existing mechanisms, which are respected and understood, to ensure that we monitor and report to Parliament on greenhouse gas emissions. I therefore urge hon. Members to reject new clause 17.

Let me turn to amendments 2, 7 and 21 to clause 89, which deals with minor amendments in consequence of our EU withdrawal. We need to ensure that the tax system continues to work effectively and that we maintain stability and certainty, including in the event that the UK leaves without a deal. To allow us to do that, clause 89 will allow minor and technical amendments to be made to UK tax law to keep it working as it does now and to update it to continue to work with changes made to other areas of law on account of EU exit. Clause 89 will provide the Government with the power to make such minor amendments.

These are, I stress again, minor and technical changes that are absolutely necessary to maintain the continued effect of tax legislation in the unlikely event of no deal. I can reassure the Committee that the power is not being taken to make changes to do anything other than ensure that existing tax legislation continues to have effect in the event of no deal. It will not be used to change tax policy or the tax paid by taxpayers. To reassure the Committee of that, I have placed a list of changes that the Government intend to make under the power in the Library and sent a copy to the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Vicky Ford: I thank the Minister for reaffirming that it is not the Government’s intention to leave with no deal. It is the intention to leave with a deal. On tax, there seemed to be some confusion over the weekend about the draft withdrawal agreement. Some people seemed to suggest that the UK would be bound into the EU tampon tax for a further five years. Can he confirm that, before jumping to conclusions about what the draft withdrawal agreement says, colleagues should instead look at No. 10’s response to Steerpike’s 40 so-called horrors and at the true facts and answers from the lawyers who negotiated it before coming up with their own concerns?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend, who is always well informed, is correct on both counts.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for confirming that from the Dispatch Box. Does he therefore agree that, before jumping to conclusions about what the draft withdrawal agreement says, colleagues should instead look at No. 10’s response to Steerpike’s 40 so-called horrors and at the true facts and answers from the lawyers who negotiated it before coming up with their own concerns?

Robert Jenrick: I would obviously advise all right hon. and hon. Members to read the withdrawal agreement, unlike the Leader of the Opposition, and not to rush
to conclusions. The document produced by No. 10 to which my hon. Friend refers, which rebuts over 40 suggested flaws in the agreement, was very instructive, and I certainly found it helpful.

To finish on this point, I re-emphasise that I have laid before the House a comprehensive list of the changes that will need to be made to tax legislation. I advise right hon. and hon. Members who are interested to take that will need to be made to tax legislation. I advise before the House a comprehensive list of the changes certain found it helpful.

Amendments 14 and 22 would require the Government to publish an economic and fiscal analysis of the effects of our exit from the European Union before using the powers in clause 89. I can reassure the Committee that the Government have already confirmed that before we bring forward the vote on the final deal, we will ensure that Parliament is presented with the appropriate analysis in good time to make an informed decision. The Chancellor set that out in his letter of 23 August to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, a copy of which is in the public domain. He said that that analysis would look at the economic and fiscal effects of leaving the EU.

To provide Members with further detail today, I can confirm that that analysis will bring together evidence from across the Government, insight from external stakeholders and a range of data and analytical tools. The analysis will consider the long-term costs and benefits of moving to new trading relationships with the EU and the rest of the world. Having considered the amendment and spoken to several right hon. and hon. Members, I am happy to confirm that the baseline for this comparison will be the status quo—that is, today’s institutional arrangements with the EU. The analysis will consider a modelled no-deal scenario, or World Trade Organisation terms; a modelled analysis of an FTA scenario; and a modelled analysis of the Government’s proposed deal. Each will be compared against the status quo of the current institutional arrangements within the EU.

Amendment 14 would not require the analysis to be published until after the Bill receives Royal Assent. As a result, the Bill would not be binding on the Government until after the meaningful vote had taken place. I hope that the commitment that the Government have made today and the conversations that I have had with Members from across the House to provide reassurance that we will publish an appropriate analysis—the analysis that right hon. and hon. Members seek—in good time before the meaningful vote.

I turn briefly to the OBR’s role, which is mentioned in amendment 14. The House will know that the OBR’s remit is clearly defined in the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, and that the amendment, which asks the OBR to assess our analysis of the effects of a deal, goes beyond its statutory responsibilities. That would set an undesirable precedent, with Parliament being able to commission specific pieces of work from the OBR on an ad hoc basis outside the clear and bounded remit set in the OBR’s charter. That would effectively transform the OBR into a parliamentary budget office, fundamentally changing its purpose and potentially damaging its credibility. Such a decision should be taken only after a full and frank debate on its own merits.

The House will be aware that the Treasury Committee, which is headed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), has appointed Sir Stephen Nickell, formerly of the OBR, to provide an independent view of the Government’s analysis. My officials have already had initial conversations with Sir Stephen about the scope and scale of his review, to ensure that we can provide him and his team with the necessary information in due course. I hope that that gives further reassurance to Members that scrutiny, of the nature that they seek, of the Government’s work will be undertaken by the Treasury Committee.

Furthermore, the OBR has already published a detailed review of the approach taken in the analysis provided across Whitehall, comparing it with other academic publications since the referendum. We believe that extending the OBR’s remit, as proposed by amendment 14, would require the OBR to analyse alternatives to Government policy. That would draw the OBR into political debate and expose it to a significant risk to its credibility and that of the UK’s fiscal framework. It remains highly unlikely that the OBR could, in the time available, go beyond the points it has already made in its discussion paper in any assessment of the Government’s analysis, bearing in mind its capacity and modelling today.

As for the effects of the power mentioned in amendment 20, I hope that my previous assurances will reassure right hon. and hon. Members that the Government intend to use the power not to introduce tax policy changes, but merely to secure the continued effective operation of the tax system. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends who sought this amendment will see that we have listened and engaged and that the reassurances that I have provided today achieve the amendment’s purpose. I therefore urge them not to proceed with their amendments.

I turn to amendment 15, which calls for the Government to provide a list of powers in relevant tax legislation that the Treasury has acquired since June 2016, or that it expects to acquire, relating to any EU exit scenario. All such powers have been passed as primary legislation. They have been scrutinised by this House and were voted through accordingly. As with all legislation, that which relates to these powers is in the public domain, should anyone wish to examine it. I do not think that it is necessary to reprise this list. I hope that hon. Members will see that amendment 15 is therefore entirely unnecessary, and I encourage them not to proceed with it.

Amendment 20 asks that no regulations be made under this power unless the UK has left the European Union without a negotiated withdrawal agreement. As is the job of any responsible Government, we are preparing for all possible EU exit outcomes, which extends to the unlikely event of no deal. As I have already said, that is not the Government’s preferred outcome. The power is tightly drafted only to provide scope for the sort of minor, technical changes I have set out in my letter to Mr Deputy Speaker. At the current time, we need the power to make changes in the event of no deal, but providing stability for tax legislation and for the taxpayer is of paramount importance into the future, regardless of our EU exit outcome. I want to ensure we can deliver that in any scenario, even if I have focused more on the unlikely event of no deal; this is what the power will provide for. However, no matter when we use the power, our intention for its use would remain the same and would not be broader in any eventuality. I hope this reassures hon. Members of the Government’s intentions in this respect, so there is no need for amendment 20.
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Dame Rosie, and thank you for calling me to speak for the Opposition on our second grouping, which includes clause 89. As the Minister has helpfully explained, this group deals with the operation of tax law in the UK after our withdrawal from the EU, with a consequential set of Brexit-related amendments. This week, we have all seen the complete chaos the Government have unleashed on the country with their disastrous handling of the Brexit negotiations. We are just months away from the UK’s exit, and it seems the Conservative party remains as divided as ever over what to do next. As the Leader of the Opposition explained in his address to the CBI earlier today, this proposed Brexit deal offers no certainty at all and in many ways is the worst of all worlds, offending remain and leave voters in equal measure. So after two years of negotiations, we are teetering dangerously close to a no-deal Brexit, which should simply never have been an option. It would be bad for individuals, for businesses and for the economy, and Labour will do all we can to prevent it.

As we have said repeatedly, Labour wants the Government to negotiate a comprehensive and permanent customs union that gives the UK a say in future trade deals and ensures that there will be no hard border in Northern Ireland. We would protect workers’ rights, block any race to the bottom and negotiate a strong single-market relationship that gives businesses continued access to European markets for goods and services.

I would like to think that we are heading for a more stable time, but that seems unlikely. I was appalled to read press reports at the weekend that Downing Street’s alleged strategy is to encourage a crash in the financial markets should the deal fail to pass through Parliament, to pressure MPs into voting for it a second time. I can only hope that those reports were false. We should never forget that the markets reflect people’s savings, investments and pensions. They should not be used as a political device by the Conservative party.

It is also worrying that the Government are steadfastly using Brexit to substantially transfer powers from Parliament to the Executive. The Opposition have warned about this repeatedly, throughout the passage of each piece of legislation connected to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. We should be deeply worried about this unprecedented transfer of powers.

We see another example in this Bill. In clause 89, which is rather innocently named “Minor amendments in consequence of EU withdrawal”, Ministers give themselves the power to make amendments to tax law outside the normal due process. Good checks and balances make for good government, which is why the Opposition have tabled a series of amendments that would help to address the democratic deficit that the provisions in the Bill would create, if passed unchecked. We do not believe it is possible to make a democratic case for the transfer to the Treasury of powers to make changes to tax law in perpetuity, which is why Labour’s amendment 2 proposes a sunset clause to the Brexit powers that the Bill will confer on the Treasury. It would ensure that those powers can only be used within two years of the passage of the Bill. Surely that offers sufficient time for the Government to use them as is required.

As the Minister outlined, the Government’s case is that during our withdrawal from the EU there may be a situation in which some elements of tax law need changing urgently or at short notice. However, we do not believe that there is a case for the powers, unless the UK crashes out of the EU with no deal. The agreement of a deal, with an attached transition period, should provide room for preparation, without the need to furnish the Executive with powers to make changes to the law unilaterally.

The number of Treasury-related statutory instruments that are currently being passed to create a new financial regulatory regime proves the point. Although it has been far from ideal for Ministers and their shadows, the use of secondary legislation is an improvement on the taking of such decisions behind closed doors in the Treasury.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Gentleman said earlier that in his relationship with the European Union he would expect to have a say in trade deals by being part of a customs union, but even when we were full members of the European Union and it agreed the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada, his party refused to vote for that deal in this House. How on earth does he think that that will work on a completely third-party, third-nation basis?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am happy to take that point, which although a little outside the remit of the Bill is none the less interesting. For us, the relationship that we
would seek with the EU would be based quite simply on a solid cost-benefit analysis of what is in the UK’s best interests. If we look at the various options on offer, given that half the world is already in a regional trading bloc or a customs union of some sort, it is absolutely clear that what we risk losing by losing frictionless trade with the European Union would never be gained by external trade deals with the rest of the world. A customs union is therefore the right way to go forward. Were the UK to enter one, we clearly could not have a situation in which we were unilaterally exposed to the deals that the EU did with other countries without having a say, so it is a pretty logical position. That does not mean that those deals would always receive the backing of all parts of this House. Elements of those deals might be unacceptable.

The point about sovereignty, which comes from Brexiteers in the main, is so important, because people say, for instance, “Let’s not do a customs union, let’s do a deal with Donald Trump’s America,” but would our constituents really accept unilateral access to the NHS for American healthcare providers? Of course they would not. Would our constituents accept hormone-treated beef in the supermarkets? Personally, I do not think they would. The question is always about the balance between what is in the proposed economic relationship and the political oversight that should go with it. That position is fairly logical and straightforward.

Jonathan Reynolds: We are not proposing to remain in the customs union but not be a member of the EU. We are discussing joining a new customs union that we would negotiate with the European Union. I will say to the hon. Gentleman—I do not think that I am revealing any secrets here—that for a large number of Conservative MPs and, indeed, perhaps for the Treasury itself, that is their preferred solution; they are just not in a position to negotiate that or to request that because of the parliamentary arithmetic of the Conservative party. It does also have the very substantial benefit of our being able to honour our commitments under the Good Friday agreement. That is something that should have been a much bigger part of the referendum negotiations, and it should certainly be a paramount concern for this House going forward. I will get back to the Finance Bill, but I hope that that allays the concerns of Conservative colleagues and makes it quite clear what we think the relationship should be going forward.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and I think that he has missed the good news of my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). She is doing a good job on amendment 15, but I think that he has missed the good news of my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) following his tenacious work. It looks like we have some movement on amendment 14 from the Government, and we will get these impact assessments before the
meaningful vote. Will my hon. Friend, the shadow Minister, comment on the fact that the last time we saw such a thing was in the horrors of the Reading Room? We were shown that in every region of our nation, even in London where my own seat is, every sector of our economy will be worse off under every form of Brexit. Will he comment on that?

9.15 pm

Jonathan Reynolds: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; I always welcome good news from my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham. Yes, it is very welcome that the Government have conceded on this point, reflecting the parliamentary arithmetic. I am not sure that they did it voluntarily, until they saw the names on the Order Paper. Transparency about the consequences of different types of Brexit arrangements has to be a good thing, because the country and all Members of this House should be as well informed as possible. It is extremely pleasing to see the Government concede on this point.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I also pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Streatham on this issue. I was happy to support him, as he has led a very valid endeavour that I hope will inform our decision making in the weeks to come.

Will the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) confirm that if these assessments indicate quite clearly that the status quo offers the best economic prospects for every part of the British state, the Labour party will support the status quo as the preferred Brexit option as we approach the next few weeks?

Jonathan Reynolds: The points I made about transparency are relevant, as every Member of this House will make different assessments. We all know that Brexit is not just an economic concern; political concerns about sovereignty and issues such as immigration form part of the decision that each of us would make. But it has to be a good thing for every part and region of the UK to have the maximum degree of transparency on the economic options available to us. Surely, transparency is the best way forward.

I return to amendment 15, which goes to the heart of what I was trying to articulate—that is, our concerns about the unprecedented power grab that this Government are undertaking. The Government have spent the last two years seizing all manner of tax powers with no regard to the constitutional role of this House. Meanwhile, Ministers have refused to honour any level of transparency, and outline once and for all a clear list of the powers that the Treasury has acquired since the referendum in June 2016 and those it expects to acquire by the time the UK leaves the EU. Amendment 15 would address this and oblige the Chancellor to publish a comprehensive list of the powers the Treasury has acquired and the powers it will then expect to acquire, and to state when we might see those powers returned to the House, where they surely belong.

Amendment 21 would provide a further important element of accountability. This would oblige the Government to deliver a review of the impact of using the powers conferred by clause 89 on tax receipts. This amendment would deliver greater transparency around the true impact of the Brexit deal that the Government have negotiated. It is vital that we have that data available so that we can discuss this in depth and quickly identify if a particular impact has occurred.

In amendment 22, the Opposition are also calling for a review of the Brexit powers being handed to the Treasury. This amendment would require the Chancellor to publish a statement assessing how the powers handed to the Treasury in this Bill would be applied respectively to Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We tabled this amendment because we need urgently to establish whether these powers will cause disparity in the treatment of Northern Ireland in comparison to the rest of the UK. Members may ask why there is urgency on this point, but it is clear that the draft withdrawal agreement that under the so-called backstop arrangement Northern Ireland will maintain a regulatory alignment with the European Union. This is the case in particular in relation to EU customs law, but it also applies to compliance with elements of single market regulation in areas such as the technical regulation of goods, agricultural production, environmental regulation, state aid and other areas of north-south co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Northern Ireland will also be included in parts of EU VAT and excise regimes and in the EU single electricity market, so Northern Ireland’s compliance with EU rules and regulations will be enforced by the EU Commission and the European Court of Justice.

With this in mind, it is clear that the powers handed to the Treasury by this legislation may not be applicable to Northern Ireland in the legal and regulatory areas under which EU authority remains supreme. We therefore seek a review of where each of the powers being granted to the Treasury can be applied in the event that the Prime Minister’s draft agreement successfully passes. This is clearly a very important amendment, and one which we hope Members of the Democratic Unionist party will also see value in passing. We therefore call on all Members of the House to look carefully at amendment 22 and support it in the Lobby.

Finally, new clause 17 would require the Government to publish a review of the effectiveness of introducing a UK carbon emissions tax in the event of a no-deal Brexit, in terms of helping the UK to meet its carbon emissions targets and carbon reduction commitments. The new clause builds on Labour’s commitment to ensure that 60% of the UK’s energy comes from zero-carbon or renewable sources by 2030.

It is worrying that making provisions for collapsing out of the European emissions trading scheme and all the benefits and economies of scale that it brings is one of the scant mentions of green issues in this Finance Bill. Our exit from the European Union cannot be used as an excuse to take a step back from action on climate change, as was outlined starkly in the report published last month by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. As I highlighted in my Second Reading speech last week, we are already lagging behind our European counterparts on green finance, as they are forging ahead with sovereign bond funds and mandatory climate disclosure laws. Our new clause would ensure that the Government were held accountable for making progress on reducing emissions, without using Brexit as an excuse to stall.
Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I have arrived late to the debate, relatively speaking, having been detained by the trains in my previous role.

I wish briefly to address amendment 14, tabled by the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna). We stand at a critical moment in our nation’s post-war history, and the decisions we take in the next few days and weeks will shape not just what happens over the next few months and years but our entire lifetimes. It is vital that we take these decisions in full possession of the facts and that we are answering the right questions. I believe amendment 14 will help us to do exactly that.

The Government are attempting to frame the choice before us in a binary way: the Prime Minister’s deal or no deal at all, which is effectively vassalage as rule takers on the one hand, or chaos and disruption on the other. As I said in my resignation letter last week, I believe that to present the country with this narrow choice represents the single greatest failure of British statecraft since the Suez crisis in the 1950s, for neither choice is in the national interest. Amendment 14 rightly seeks to expose this for what it is and will make clear everything to full public scrutiny. Both options—deal and no deal—are significantly worse for the UK than our present arrangements, and the amendment will make that clear by requiring the Government to be transparent.

Any serious appraisal of a major policy change needs to measure the costs and benefits against a clear economic baseline. Indeed, the Green Book—the Treasury manual on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects—states clearly that the Government’s preferred course of action must always be assessed against a “do nothing, business as usual” benchmark. If the business as usual option—in this case, staying in the EU—were not to be included in any such appraisal, the process would be contrary to the Government’s own manual, in addition to being clearly below the standard applied in any well-run business.

I am worried and concerned that it appears to have taken an amendment that the Government would have been in no position to overturn to secure their commitment that this full appraisal will eventually be published in time for it to be fully considered by Members of this House before the meaningful vote. Members need to know detailed information about this appraisal. We need to know the impact, region by region and sector by sector, because the impact, as hon. Members have made clear, will vary sharply around the country. We also need to know which groups in society will suffer the most, relative to other courses of action available to us as a country. I would be grateful if the Minister, in his winding-up speech, could confirm that that will form part of the appraisal that the Government publish and that the OBR will provide an independent assessment of the Government’s appraisal.

If we have learned anything from the chaos of the past 30 months, it is that facts are sacred. This debate has been characterised by falsehoods and misinformation from day one. It is extraordinary that we have now had to force the Government, at this relatively late stage, to publish the vital information necessary for an informed public debate. Some may say that this horse has long bolted, but I say it is better late than never. I believe that amendment 14 will go some way to righting this wrong.

Given that the reality of Brexit has proved to be so far from what was once promised during the campaign, the democratic thing to do is not just to accept amendment 14, as my hon. Friend the Minister has done, and to publish the like-for-like economic analysis showing how costly this Brexit will be, but to give the public the final say about whether they really want to proceed on this hopeless basis.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who kindly spoke in favour of amendment 14. The amendment is in my name and in those of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and 70 other Members from all parts of the House. I want to take this opportunity to thank all the Members who have supported this amendment.

As the Minister said, what we were seeking to do with this amendment to clause 89—as he says, the clause allows the Government to make amendments to UK tax law—is to ensure that this House is provided with all the information needed for it to come to an informed decision. The Prime Minister made a very important admission last week, both outside No. 10 and in this House, where she moved on from the falsehood that has been peddled by too many, which is that this House has only two choices: the withdrawal agreement that has been presented by the Government, or leaving without an agreement at all. She moved on from that to the very clear choice that we now know faces this country: no Brexit, no deal or the agreement that the Government are putting forward. As may already have been said in this debate, this is arguably the biggest decision that this House will be making since the second world war, and it is absolutely vital that we are provided with the requisite data in order to come to an informed decision.

For the benefit of the record, our amendment seeks to make the exercise of the powers sought in clause 89, which the Minister mentioned, subject to the publication of a proper economic impact assessment of, and comparison between, each of the three scenarios the Prime Minister has set out before any meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement takes place under the provisions of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It is true, as the Minister said, that this Bill is likely to become an Act after the meaningful vote, but the amendment we have tabled is worded in such a way that its provisions will need to have been compiled with before the meaningful vote in order for the powers under clause 89—to keep the tax system running in the event of no deal—to be usable.

I want very quickly to explain why we felt it was necessary to table this amendment and to deal with the three principal objections, which have been made in the House before, standing in the way of providing the information that this House needs to make a decision.

Kevin Hollinrake: I think it was Mark Twain who first said, “You should never make predictions, particularly about the future”. The hon. Gentleman refers to these forecasts as data, but does he accept that they are not data? They would simply be predictions, and as predictions they are inherently volatile because they cannot take into account the reaction of business to the different scenarios we may be in. Does he accept that they are simply a forecast and cannot be relied on as facts?
Chuka Umunna: The hon. Gentleman intervened at precisely the moment when I was about to deal with that point, which is one of the three objections that are raised to our being provided with this important information. I will go through each of them, and I will address his point.

The first argument that is usually put up as to why the House should not be provided with the relevant economic impact assessments, which the Government are producing internally in any event, is that publishing that analysis would undermine the ongoing negotiations. That is clearly ridiculous. The leaking of the cross-Whitehall economic impact assessments by BuzzFeed in January had no obvious impact on the Government’s negotiating position vis-à-vis the European Commission, and frankly it is not as if those on the other side of the negotiating table will not have access to similar economic forecasts and models so that they can come to similar conclusions.

9.30 pm

The second argument, which I would argue is more distasteful, is that Treasury forecasts cannot be relied upon—not because of their accuracy, which the hon. Gentleman just referred to, but because they somehow been riggled. The Brexit champions, most of whom sit on the Government Benches, tell us that the Treasury is stuffed full of civil servants whom they describe as remainiacs, remoaners and God knows what else, and who they suggest doctor the figures to say what they want. I say to the civil servants here today and those listening that there is no shame in believing, as I do, that the best deal with the European Union is the one that we have now.

I want to say very clearly on the record that the routine denigration of our civil servants, in all Departments, and the questioning of their independence by the European Research Group is a complete and absolute disgrace. These are dedicated, faithful public servants doing their jobs, and they do not deserve to have their motives impugned.

I note that these champions of the Brexit cause take issue with the accuracy and independence of Treasury forecasts when they are on Brexit issues, but when it comes to the impact of austerity on the public finances or changes to benefits—the cack-handed introduction of universal credit, for example—they are never shy of quoting official forecasts that suit them.

Let us not forget that those who question the robustness and accuracy of forecasts do not exactly have a very good record of forecasting themselves. Let us not forget what the now ex-ex-Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), said. This guy said that we would get a free trade and customs agreement concluded before March 2019. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who is often in debates such as this, told us:

“Getting out of the EU can be quick and easy—the UK holds most of the cards”.

And as we all know, the former Foreign Secretary famously went around the country in a big red bus proclaiming that Brexit would lead to £350 million a week extra going into the NHS.

Then, of course, there has been the ultimate forecast from these people over the past 48 hours. This ERG has been going around stamping its feet and telling us all that if it does not get the extreme form of Brexit that it wants, the poor Prime Minister will have these 48 letters going in calling for a vote of no confidence in her. As far as I am aware, she is still sitting in Downing Street right now. I do not know whether the ERG has hit the 48 letters it said there were going to be, but the bottom line is that these individuals, who impugn the motives of Treasury civil servants and call into question the accuracy of their forecasts, are in no position whatsoever to lecture any of us on the accuracy of forecasts given the huge, outlandish claims that they have made over the past few years.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about statistics. Does he not agree with me that many Members—this is shared across the House—use statistics as a drunk man uses a lamppost: for support, rather than illumination? Will he join me in trying to strengthen the Office for Budget Responsibility, so it can have more resources and ensure the statistics presented to the House are objectively verified?

Chuka Umunna: I have to say that when I gave way to the hon. Gentleman I did not imagine I would actually end up agreeing with what he said. He pre-empts my final point, which is that I understand the general worry about the accuracy of official forecasts. The bottom line is that we are never going to get forecasts that are 100% accurate, but we have to work with a certain number of assumptions to make policy, as I am sure he will discover if he has the privilege of serving in government.

On the point he makes about the OBR, I was quite careful in how I drafted the amendment. Its powers and capacity from a resource point of view are circumscribed, but there is no reason why we should not change the statutory remit of the OBR. At the very least, for those who worry about the accuracy of forecasts, we could see whether the OBR would be prepared to do an evaluation on the methodology and the techniques it uses to produce the forecasts by the Treasury.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this issue relates not just to future forecasting? The Health and Social Care Committee has been hearing that hundreds of millions of pounds are already being spent by pharmaceutical companies on no-deal contingency planning—money that would be far better invested in our NHS.

Chuka Umunna: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady.

I will finish by saying this: the reason we tabled the amendment, and why I think so many colleagues on all sides of the House supported it, is because ultimately it is an assertion of parliamentary sovereignty. If the House were denied this really important information in order to come to a considered informed view, it would make a mockery of the argument that says the reason for withdrawing from the European Union is to assert parliamentary sovereignty.

I did not expect to be in this position at the beginning of today. I am grateful to the Minister for making this important concession and for making the promise, at the Dispatch Box, that we will get the economic impact assessments that we sought to secure through the amendment. Given the firm commitment he has made...
to the Committee, I will not be pressing the amendment to a vote. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all Members who supported it. Ultimately, we have done this because we think it is important that our constituents understand why we make the big decision that we are going to have to make in the next few weeks.

Justine Greening: I have no doubt that at the last election, at which my hon. Friend was elected, there were many different candidates on his ballot paper, and I do not think that his constituents were prevented from making the very fine choice they made. They were quite capable of working their way through the different options. This House has MPs representing very different parties and communities, and again, the electorate have been perfectly capable of working their way through what, as we all know, are often very lengthy and different party manifestos. Like any election, this is a choice about the future. There are different choices, just like in any election, and we have to confront it as a choice to two just for the sake of it. Arguments can be made for having a two-choice referendum, but saying that it is too complicated for the British public is not one that holds in practice. This is a British public who regularly choose between many different alternatives and indeed, in some elections, are sophisticated enough to vote tactically to get the outcome that they want.

My proposal, as my hon. Friend may be aware, is that people have not just one but two other choices. That will enable them to pick their own compromise, because it is clear to me that this House will not be able to reach a compromise and will just vote against all the different paths. I have no doubt that we will come back to that debate and I very much respect the different views that people have in this House. This is an important debate and we need to get a route forward. I simply reflect on the fact that my view remains as it was back in July. Regrettably perhaps, this House is gridlocked, and my advice now, as it was back then, is that, rather than ignoring that fact, we can simply reflect the fact that we are, however difficult that is. We need to make a proposal on how to get through it, so that ideally, we do not reach that moment of crisis when we have seen every single option ahead of us on Brexit voted down.

I was quite surprised, when the Treasury did its previous impact assessment, that more MPs did not go to the Reading Room to look at it. As I understand it, about 60 MPs out of 650 booked themselves time to look through the analysis. It is crucial that MPs look at it. I thought it was important to do so, but clearly if MPs find it hard to go to the Treasury, the Treasury must go to MPs. I would very much recommend that that analysis be sent out to every Member and, if he can, that the Minister finally sets out what he means by publishing analysis “in good time”. If Members have parliamentary questions to submit, clearly it is important that the House should have time to scrutinise it all properly.

9.45 pm

The Prime Minister has acknowledged, as has the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna), to whom I pay tribute for tabling the amendment, which I support, that there are three options facing our country. It means that we do not have to have a divisive debate about what direction we take—we can simply reflect the fact that there are three options and that they all have pros and cons. We need to have a measured debate, not a divisive one, but whether it is divisive will depend on all of us
and how we conduct ourselves over the coming weeks and on whether we can accept that people have different views, respect those views and then engage with them constructively.

I have no doubt that the analysis the Treasury will produce, having preceded on this amendment, will be one of the ways by which we give ourselves and the country the chance to have an informed debate on the most important question to have faced this country in over half a century.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I rise to speak in favour of SNP amendments 7 to 10 and new clauses 10 and 11. I would also like to mention amendments 14, 15, 22, 20 and 2 and new clause 17, all of which we would be comfortable supporting, if any of them are pushed to the vote.

There has been a lengthy discussion across the Committee on trade deals. People are confusing free trade agreements and trade deals. It is perfectly possible to make arrangements that improve the flow of trade without signing an FTA; they are two very separate things. It is not understood widely enough that any trade agreement between countries involves compromise. Whatever is signed up to between, let’s say, the UK and the USA will involve the UK having to give some things away as well as gaining something.

The consultation on trade deals looked at trade deals with New Zealand and Australia, with the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-pacific partnership, and with the US. However, despite the fact that UK Government Members have talked about how important our trade is with countries such as South Korea and how fast it has grown, the Government have not consulted on that and they did not do so because we have those trade deals already, as a member of the EU. That is why our trade has grown so quickly with South Korea.

Thank you for your indulgence, Dame Rosie. I will move now to the actual subject of the debate. Our amendment 7 asks that clause 89 be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. I appreciate that the Minister has put a list in the Library, and I will take a look at the list of tax changes he proposes to make under the clause, but I am on the Committee that is sifting the statutory instruments the Government are bringing forward, and some of those SIAs that the Government think should be taken under the negative procedure should never have been so proposed. Some are fairly dramatic changes to the law—to powers or new institutions, for example—and yet are being put to the statutory instrument sifting Committee as negative instruments.

I hope that the Minister will forgive me, but I do not trust the Government to introduce only measures in the category that we believe should be subject to the negative procedure. I will look carefully at that list, but I will still press amendment 7, because, given my experience of Ministers, I do not yet have the level of comfort that I need.

**Robert Jenrick:** I hope that in due course the hon. Lady will have an opportunity to read the letter that is in the Library and see that these are truly minor technical amendments, changing, for example, a reference to the EU to a reference to the EU and the UK, and a reference to euros to a reference to pounds sterling. I hope that, in due course, she will be comfortable with those minor technical changes.

**Kirsty Blackman:** As I have said, I will definitely read the letter. However, I draw the Minister’s attention to the House of Lords Committee that met, I understand, on 17 November—possibly not, as that was at the weekend, but very recently—to discuss the Finance Bill 2019. Someone drew my attention to an article by Wendy Bradley, which talks about HMRC’s powers and about power creep. Wendy Brady says that “it is incumbent on Parliament to determine whether the powers it has given HMRC are sufficient and being exercised correctly”.

That, in my view, is important in relation not just to HMRC, but to the powers of the Treasury and the powers of Ministers. I think it important for Parliament to consider what delegated authority we are handing over, whether to the Minister, to the Treasury, to the Chancellor, or to HMRC directly. As I have said before, the Government do not adequately review these matters, publicise those reviews and repeat them regularly. It is important to have a handle on this, especially now, when so much delegated authority is being given to various institutions. It is important to have an idea of how much power has been taken away from Parliament and ceded to those institutions and for there to be a regular review of whether it is still necessary for it to be in their hands.

Let me now say something about the release of the analysis and the changes that the Minister has said he will make. I praise the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) for his work and his amendment and for creating the real change that we have seen in the Government’s position today. It is important for us to be able to support and trust that analysis—to believe that it is accurate. Mention of the OBR was positive in that regard, because people trust that the OBR is an impartial observer of these matters.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) initiated a debate in Westminster Hall about the OBR’s remit, and I found it incredibly interesting. I learnt a huge amount about the workings of other organisations around the world. We do not have an organisation that reviews Government policy impartially across the board because the OBR’s remit is so tight, being confined to scrutiny of budgetary matters. I was pleased to support the hon. Gentleman that day. Widening the OBR’s remit would be extremely useful, because, as I have said, people out there trust the OBR to get this right.

A status quo baseline against which all the options should be compared is important, and I am pleased that the Minister referred to it. What was said about whether the analysis will be produced in good time was also important, especially given the lack of time that we had to scrutinise the Bill and the short period during which it was in our hands before we had to talk about it on Second Reading. It was only published on the Wednesday, and then we had to stand up and talk about it on the Monday. Let me say again that if the Government want us to trust, they need to gain that trust, and they must therefore produce legislation in what is actually good time, rather than what they say is good time.

Obviously, everything in the Bill is a prediction. Everything in the Red Book is a prediction for future years. Everything that the Government predict, in terms of their tax take for the changes to entrepreneurs relief or anything else in the Red Book, is a prediction. We have to work on that basis, but we must have the best possible predictions, and, as I have said, they must be
looked at by an impartial observer so that we can be absolutely sure that they are as close to accurate—or as close to a best guess—as they can possibly be.

Jonathan Edwards: A number of Members have talked about the upcoming votes being the most important votes that we will ever undertake as Members of Parliament. Does the hon. Lady therefore agree that it is vital that the independent assessment should be published in the public domain, so that our constituents can understand the decisions that we are making? We should not have to have one of those Reading Room scenarios, as we did with previous assessments.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree. The Reading Room provided for the cross-Whitehall analysis was not fit for purpose, in that I could not go there and mull over the papers in the way that I would normally do. Generally, if I am presented with a Finance Bill, for example, I will sit at home and read it. That is what I like to do on a Saturday night. I will sit at home and read these things. We have to be able to access any analysis that is published in a way that suits us, and releasing it publicly would be the best possible way to do this. Another reason for doing that is that the external stakeholders could provide their comments in the best possible way, so I entirely support the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion.

New clause 11 asks for a report on the consultations that have, or have not, been carried out in relation to the tax measures. As I said on Second Reading, not enough of the tax measures in the Bill were consulted on this year. I understand that there were more such consultations in previous years. If we do not want the Government to have to row back next year because they have screwed something up as a result of inadequate consultation, it will be important for these tax measures to be published and consulted on and for us to get the expert advice that we need from the stakeholders.

Clause 90 is just bizarre. I read it, and then I had to go back and read it again because I could not believe that a clause would give the Government the power to spend whatever they liked. It does not cap the spend on the emissions reduction trading scheme’s preparatory expenditure. I was genuinely confused about how the Government could propose that. The clause will give the Government carte blanche. Our amendment 9 and our new clause 10 ask for a Commons resolution and an expenditure review before that expenditure can take place. We think it reasonable—and I am sure the general public would think it reasonable—that if the Government want to spend money on something, they should tell us how much they intend to spend.

The Government are spending money to stand still. This is a cost, and the Government have to spend the money for things to be exactly the same after Brexit as they are today. It is a cost that we would not have if we were not leaving the European Union. The Minister talked about the estimates process. I am pleased that he is as interested and excited by the estimates process as I am. I talk on the estimates whenever I possibly can. There are two parts to the estimates process: one in February and the other in July. I am not sure whether this money counts as in-year spend or as part of next year’s spend. We might be able to discuss it in February, which would be great, because at least that would be before we leave the EU. However, if it is classed as next year’s expenditure, we might not be able to discuss it until July, by which point the money will have been spent.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): We can discuss this all we like during the estimates process, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is incredibly difficult to actually vote on any of this? Despite all the promises made when the English votes for English laws system was introduced, it really is impossible for Members of Parliament to have a say on specific aspects of Government spending through the estimates process.

Kirsty Blackman: That is absolutely the case. The Minister’s comments about the lack of ability to scrutinise spend in the Finance Bill were incredibly illuminating. The reality is that we cannot adequately scrutinise or amend spend anywhere. I was talking to some people about the Budget process and the Finance Bill in the last couple of weeks, and about how the two fit together. I explained that we discuss tax in the Finance Bill, but that we do not discuss spend until the estimates process. Some spending measures will come through, at which point we will sanction them. For example, if the immigration Bill comes forward, we would imagine that it would have some spend associated with it, and we will debate that spend at that time. But a huge proportion of the billions of pounds that the Government spend on a regular basis is only ever discussed during the departmental estimates, which we cannot amend or change. I do not understand how we can have a Parliament that is supposed to be so powerful and supposed to be taking back control when we do not have control over Government spend, which is surely fundamental to how the Government behave.

10 pm

I am a bit on my high horse in relation to Government tax and spend, but this is incredibly important. Surely, one of the most important things that we do is to scrutinise the Government’s spending, and we are not able to do it adequately because the rules of this House bar us from doing so. We cannot scrutinise tax adequately in relation to this Bill because the Government have failed to introduce an amendment of the law resolution, so we cannot propose anything tangible or very tangible. Then the Government will stand up in the Public Bill Committee and say, “They are just asking for a review. We are going to say no because it is just a review.” We are asking for a review as we cannot move anything that has any actual effect because the Government are not introducing an amendment of the law resolution. This part of the Bill, particularly clause 90, really bugs me. I was really annoyed that there was a total lack of clarity from the Government—that the explanatory notes did not even say how much they intended to spend on this.

In relation to the minor and consequential amendments, I am very pleased that the Minister has put forward a list of the proposed changes that he intends to make. In reality, however, even though he has put forward this list, he is not held to it. He is given more wide-ranging power than it actually appears from that list. Therefore, he could in future, because of the powers that are being given, introduce something that is not on the list. We will be looking to press amendment 7.
Grant Shapps: I rise briefly to address clause 89, which is on an amendment to tax legislation in consequence of EU withdrawal, and to make one specific comment to the Minister that I hope he will take on board and do something about.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on general aviation, which has as its membership 177 Members from across this House and other place. There is a particular issue that I am very keen for the Minister to know about in relation to pilot training. According to Boeing, the world will need 790,000 more pilots in the next 20 years. The UK, with English as our language and with our history in aviation, should be in an absolutely key place to train new pilots, but there is a massive problem: in this country, people have to pay for that training themselves. It costs about £100,000, and then the Government charge £20,000 VAT on top of that. The all-party group has taken up this issue with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He tells us that it is tracked into EU regulations and there is nothing that we can do about it during our time within the EU. However, I want to make an impassioned plea to the Minister to have a really good think about what we could do with regard to clause 89.

It is clear and obvious—one need only travel on an aircraft anywhere to realise this—that the pilots in this country, and indeed worldwide, but in this country generally, are nearly all male, nearly all middle-class and nearly all from backgrounds where families might say, “I’ll tell you what—we’ll remortgage our home and let you go and spend £120,000 on learning to be a commercial pilot.” That puts off too many people from a very hard-to-reach sections of society. That puts off a lot of people, particularly women, who we want to persuade into these very well-paid STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—jobs, which really should be the future for this country.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The ambassador for the all-party group is Carol Vorderman, who has probably done more than any other single living person to try to encourage young women to take up aviation as a profession, but the young women she is trying to persuade are hitting the buffers all the time because they are coming up against this cost. That is driving our trainee pilots overseas to places like Spain, which does not have the VAT, when we ought to be training them at home. Should this not be taken on board by the Treasury?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a crazy situation. We are driving pilot training out of the UK, but English is the language of the air and should be our natural advantage. Our ambassador for the all-party group, Carol Vorderman regularly reminds us that she wanted to go into the Air Force but was rejected, not through any lack of knowledge, STEM education or mathematical ability, but because she was a woman. It cannot be right that our Government are not able to address this.

I am very hopeful that the Minister will take on board clause 89, which will allow the amendment to tax legislation in consequence of leaving the EU, to do what other EU countries have somehow already managed to do—such as Spain, which does not charge VAT on pilot training. This gives us an enormous opportunity as a country to take a big chunk out of the global pilot training market, which should be, in effect, a massive export for the UK.

While we are on the VAT issue, I have one other point. This country has the ability to lead aviation into a much quieter, cleaner and more environmentally friendly future. The future of aviation eventually is to have electricity in planes—electric planes—but that will not happen without having the same dedication and enthusiasm that this Government and the previous one showed towards electric vehicles transferred to electric aviation.

This is a revolution in aviation that is coming, but it would be very encouraging if we saw the UK lead the way, and, again, this is in no small part down to how VAT is treated, in terms of not only pilot training but the inquiry, investigation, research and development that goes into electric aircraft.

The all-party group is starting a STEM aviation working group headed by a fantastic woman called Karen Spencer from Harlow College. It has the aviation STEM college at Stansted airport, where it is training 294 youngsters this year and over 500 young people next year in STEM aviation qualifications. I encourage the Minister to go and see it for himself. I believe that if we work together on this we can make aviation a much more inclusive profession, and it starts with clause 89 and what can be done under these amendments to tax legislation in consequence of EU withdrawal.

Vicky Ford: I too wish to speak about clause 89, which allows the Treasury to make minor amendments to tax legislation after we have left the EU.

EU tax issues are often extremely controversial. I think back to EU tax decisions I have seen in the past, such as the decision not to introduce a financial transaction tax, which this side of the House always strongly objected to but the other side would strongly have proposed at a European level. We objected to it because we felt it would have unintended economic consequences. Then there were the changes to the VAT MOSS—mini one-stop shop—situation for digital tax for small businesses. These decisions were taken without deep consultation or deep impact assessments, but were then found to have a huge number of unintended consequences. There were also the controversial issues to do with VAT on tampon taxes that sometimes came back.

Anneliese Dodds: It is important that Members are not misled, and it is important to say for the purposes of accuracy that a number of EU countries are looking to move forward with a financial transactions tax through the open method of co-ordination that I know the hon. Lady is very well aware of through her expert knowledge of the EU.

Vicky Ford: That brings me back to the point I was making: EU taxation matters can be hugely controversial, partly because decisions affecting tax at an EU level are often unanimous decisions, and therefore it would be very difficult for one member state to change them if a decision has gone wrong. Because they are so controversial it is worth thinking about the delegation of powers given to Ministers here. Indeed, during my time looking at European matters, I long argued for the concept of better regulation before decisions were made. People should be consulted and impact assessments published.
Only after the assessments have been made public and the views of stakeholders who might be affected taken into consideration should decisions be made.

That is why I sit on ESIC, the European Statutory Instruments Committee, to which the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) referred. It was a Committee that I argued we needed. She suggested that when it decides to change a negative instrument to an affirmative instrument, that is because of some controversy with the Government’s decision, but by establishing that Committee, under the excellent chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), we can ensure extra transparency in these complex decisions. I genuinely believe that we should think carefully before giving delegated powers to Ministers. However, clause 89 is very much about making minor decisions. It is tightly worded, and I do not believe that the amendments tabled by Opposition Members are necessary, as they would cause over-complexity. Amendments under clause 89 would be necessary, were we to leave the EU without a deal.

I am absolutely convinced that leaving the EU without a deal is not in the interests of this country, and I am glad to hear Ministers confirm that. However, I would also be glad to hear Ministers confirm that they will give Members a great deal more detail about the impact assessments of a no-deal scenario and a deal scenario, and also how that compares with remaining a member of the European Union, before our final vote on the withdrawal agreement, so that we can all be fully apprised of the impacts and make our decisions wisely.

Kevin Hollinrake: I want to speak first to amendment 14. The hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) is no longer in his place, but he said that all the choices before us were the worst possible choices and worse than the deal that we have today. I was certainly not anyone who campaigned to leave the European Union—I have my reservations about our departure from an institution of which we have been a member for effectively 45 years—but we should not ignore the opportunities that lie ahead of us.

I do not look at these things through rose-tinted spectacles, but many years ago, following protests by those concerned about the impact on their livelihoods of imports from India by the East India Company and the successful lobbying of their Members of Parliament, legislation was introduced from 1700 called the Calico Act, which banned all imports of calico—rough-cotton cloth—from India. That gave rise to the industrial revolution, because at that point we could not produce enough calico, so Watt linked his steam engine to Hargreaves’s spinning jenny and mass production resulted.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman mentions the historical Calico Act. He does know that it also impoverished the people of India, rather than just creating the industrial revolution.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman may well be aware of that fact, but that is not the point that I was making. I am not keen to impoverish people from any nation; the point is that what happened gave rise to a huge opportunity. Amendment 14 looks at one side of the equation, as if we can rely on a Treasury forecast simply as fact. It does not take into account the other side of the equation, which is that business will respond to the future framework that it is part of. There are concerns about the future, but there are also opportunities.

I want to talk mainly about clauses 68 to 78, which concern our carbon emissions. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) seemed to imply that we were not succeeding at reducing our carbon emissions, but actually the UK is fifth in the world in the climate change performance index, a German-based index published every year by Germanwatch. We are ahead of many countries that people might think would be ahead of us, including France, Italy and Germany. I cannot say that our climate change credentials are second to none, but they are second to those of only four other countries. Every other country that we might mention—other than, I think, Norway, Sweden and Lithuania—is behind us on that performance index. We are performing admirably in carbon emissions, but we need the right mechanisms to enable us to continue that success. The carbon emissions tax that the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury described earlier is a good framework to ensure that the carbon price is right and business has stability in the undesirable event of a no-deal situation.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friends are not a big fan of shale gas, but there are huge opportunities. Amendment 14 looks at one side of the equation, which is that business will respond to the future framework that it is part of. There are concerns about the future, but there are also opportunities.

Vicky Ford: Does my hon. Friend agree that stability in the carbon pricing regime is as important as any other area of business legislation? That is why it is important that we deal with the devil in the detail in the Bill.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Above all, business is looking for stability. It is absolutely right that in the worst-case scenario, in which we end up with no deal, we have a stable framework to enable us to manage our future trading relationship with the European Union.

Vicky Ford: Does my hon. Friend agree that although the clause is helpful in giving some stability, it does not give anything like the level of stability that would be delivered by a negotiated exit?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is hugely important that we have the negotiated exit that we all want. No deal is the worst possible option, and it is not where we want to go. Nevertheless, we cannot take no deal off the table.

I return to my key point about our future energy emissions and ensuring that we reduce our carbon emissions wherever we can. We are world leaders in moving our electricity production away from coal, which we have committed to phasing out by 2025, and into gas.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend has done an awful lot of research into the energy mix that we might require to achieve those targets. Does he agree that carbon pricing sends an important signal to ensure that the phase-out of coal is delivered on time and that other technologies—such as gas and renewables—come online to enable us to hit those targets?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has a great deal of knowledge in this area, too, and I absolutely defer to it. This discussion about the most energy-efficient way to produce our electricity has run throughout my parliamentary career. I know that my hon. Friend is not a big fan of shale gas, but there are
petroleum exploration and development licences right across my constituency. Over the last three years I have not had a frack-free day; in fact, I spent some time out in Pennsylvania looking at shale gas exploration out there. The US has used shale gas to excellent effect in reducing its carbon emissions.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend is very kind to give way a second time. The issue is not necessarily where the gas comes from, but the fact that it is an important part of our future generation capacity and it is, for now, indispensable to the delivery of heat. Whether it is delivered onshore or offshore is not necessarily the important part of that debate.

Kevin Hollinrake: It is interesting; my hon. Friend says that the point is not where gas comes from, but imported gas has a larger carbon footprint. That is particularly true if it is put in large ships that go from Qatar to the UK, in which case its temperature has to be reduced to about minus 156 °C in order to liquefy it. If we produce gas domestically, its carbon footprint is much smaller, and that is why shale gas makes sense. As he knows, we import about half our gas, but by 2030 we will be importing about 70% of it. It makes sense to produce something that we would otherwise have to import. On that point, I am happy to conclude, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 68 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 69 to 78 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 89

MINOR AMENDMENTS IN CONSEQUENCE OF EU WITHDRAWAL

Amendment proposed: 22, page 66, line 30, at end insert—

'(1A) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, no later than a week after the passing of this Act and before exercising the power in subsection (1), lay before the House of Commons a review of the following matters—

(a) the fiscal and economic effects of the exercise of those powers and of the outcome of negotiations for the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union giving rise to their exercise;

(b) a comparison of those fiscal and economic effects with the effects if a negotiated withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship with the EU had been agreed to;

(c) any differences in the exercise of those powers in respect of—

(i) Great Britain, and

(ii) Northern Ireland;

(d) any differential effects in relation to the matters specified in paragraphs (a) and (b) in relation between—

(i) Great Britain, and

(ii) Northern Ireland.’—[Jonathan Reynolds.]’

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 271, Noes 295.

Division No. 262] [10.20 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  Ali, Rushanara
Abrahams, Debbie  Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike  Elliott, Julie
Antoniacci, Tonia  Ellman, Dame Louise
Ashworth, Jonathan  Elmore, Chris
Bailey, Mr Adrian  Esterson, Bill
Bardell, Hannah  Evans, Chris
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  Farrelly, Paul
Beckett, rh Margaret  Farron, Tim
Benn, rh Hilary  Fellows, Marion
Berger, Luciana  Field, rh Frank
Betts, Mr Clive  Fitzpatrick, Jim
Black, Mhairi  Fletcher, Colleen
Blackford, rh Ian  Flint, rh Caroline
Blackman, Kirsty  Fovargue, Yvonne
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  Foxcroft, Vicky
Blomfield, Paul  Frith, James
Brabin, Tracy  Fumiss, Gill
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  Gaffney, Hugh
Brake, rh Tom  Gardiner, Barry
Brock, Deidre  George, Ruth
Brown, Alan  Gethins, Stephen
Brown, Lyn  Gibson, Patricia
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  Gill, Preet Kaur
Bryant, Chris  Glindon, Mary
Buck, Ms Karen  Godsiff, Mr Roger
Burgon, Richard  Goodman, Helen
Butler, Dawn  Grady, Patrick
Byrne, rh Liam  Grant, Peter
Cable, rh Sir Vince  Gray, Neil
Cadbury, Ruth  Green, Kate
Cameron, Dr Lisa  Greenwood, Lilian
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  Greenwood, Margaret
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  Griffith, Nia
Carden, Dan  Grogan, John
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  Haigh, Louise
Champion, Sarah  Hanson, rh David
Chapman, Jenny  Hardy, Emma
Charalambous, Bambos  Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cherry, Joanna  Harris, Carolyn
Ciwyd, rh Ann  Hayes, Helen
Coaker, Vernon  Hayman, Sue
Cooper, Julie  Healey, rh John
Cooper, Rosie  Hendrick, Sir Mark
Cooper, rh Yvette  Hendry, Drew
Cowan, Ronnie  Hebbum, Mr Stephen
Coyle, Neil  Hill, Mike
Crausby, Sir David  Hillier, Meg
Crawley, Angela  Hobhouse, Wera
Creasy, Stella  Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Cryer, John  Hoey, Kate
Cummings, Judith  Hollern, Kate
Cunningham, Alex  Hosie, Stewart
Cunningham, Mr Jim  Huq, Dr Rupa
Daby, Janet  Hussain, Imran
Davey, rh Sir Edward  Jardine, Christine
David, Wayne  Jarvis, Dan
Davies, Geraint  Johnson, Diana
Day, Martyn  Jones, Darren
De Cordova, Marsha  Jones, Gerald
De Piero, Gloria  Jones, Graham P.
Dent Coad, Emma  Jones, Helen
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  Jones, Sarah
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  Jones, Susan Elan
Dodds, Anneliese  Kane, Mike
Doughty, Stephen  Keeley, Barbara
Dowd, Peter  Kendall, Liz
Drew, Dr David  Khan, Atzal
Dromey, Jack  Killen, Ged
Duffield, Rosie  Kinnock, Stephen
Eagle, Ms Angela  Kyle, Peter
Eagle, Maria  Laird, Leslie
Edwards, Jonathan  Lake, Ben
Efford, Clive  Lamb, rh Norman

NOES
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeill, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
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
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morrison, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
O'Mara, Jared
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philpott, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yammin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela

Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Rees, Ellie
Rees, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiqui, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeter, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thelwiss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timmings, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Nazir
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Nic Dakin

Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Brine, Steve
Brookeshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clark, Collin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doye-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam

Frasier, rh Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fyeh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
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
Heron, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hudgell, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian

Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy

NOES

Atkins, Victoria
Argar, Edward
Andrew, Stuart
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy

Frasier, rh Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fyeh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
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
Heron, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Hudgell, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian

Finance (No. 3) Bill
Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: 7, page 67, line 1, leave out subsection (5) and insert—

“(5) No statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may be made unless a draft has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the House of Commons.” — [Kirsty Blackman.] This amendment would make clause 89 (Minor amendments in consequence of EU withdrawal) subject to affirmative procedure.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 41, Noes 296.

Division No. 263]

AYES

Hosie, Stewart
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lloyd, Stephen
Lucas, Caroline
MacNeill, Angus Brendan
Mc Nally, John
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
Monaghan, Carol
Moran, Layla
Newlands, Gavin
O'Hara, Brendan
Saville Roberts, Liz Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel

Tellers for the Ayes: David Linden and Marion Fellows

NOES

Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alan
Cartlidge, James
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, rh Sir Christopher
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Double, Steve
Disposal of the business to be concluded at that time.

Question accordingly negatived.

10.46 pm

More than six hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 12 November).

The Chair put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Clauses 89 and 90 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Chair put forthwith the Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83D).

Clauses 89 and 90 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair (Programme Order, 12 November).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Progress reported; Committee to sit again tomorrow.

**Business without Debate**

**DRAFT PARLIAMENTARY BUILDINGS (RESTORATION AND RENEWAL) BILL (JOINT COMMITTEE)**

Motion made,

That this House concurs with the Lords Message of Tuesday 23 October, that it is expedient that a Joint Committee of Lords and Commons be appointed to consider and report on the Draft...
Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill presented to both Houses on Thursday 18 October 2018 (Cm 9710), and that the Committee should report on the draft Bill by Thursday 28 February 2019.

That a Select Committee of six Members be appointed to join with a committee to be appointed by the Lords for this purpose.

That the Committee shall have power—

(i) to send for persons, papers and records;
(ii) to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House;
(iii) to report from time to time;
(iv) to appoint specialist advisers; and
(v) to adjourn from place to place within the United Kingdom.

That the quorum of the Committee shall be three; and

That Neil Gray, Meg Hillier, Mr David Jones, Sir Edward Leigh, Dame Caroline Spelman and Mark Tami be members of the Committee.—(Amanda Milling.)

Hon. Members: Object.

PRIVATE MEMBERS’ BILLS

Motion made,

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 14(8), Private Members’ bills shall have precedence over government business on 25 January 2019, 8 February 2019 and 8 March 2019.

—(Amanda Milling.)

Hon. Members: Object.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6))

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Tax Collection and Management (Wales) Act 2016 and the Land Transaction Tax and Anti-avoidance of Devolved Taxes (Wales) Act 2017 (Consequential Amendments) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 10 October 2018, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Ruth Cadbury be discharged from the Justice Committee and Janet Daby be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)

UK Entry Visas

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

10.50 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am pleased to have secured this debate. I start with a slight sense of déjà vu, because in June 2016 I led a short debate in Westminster Hall on visas for visitors from sub-Saharan Africa. It was a different Minister in that debate, mind you; he went on to become the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, so who knows what awaits the Minister for Immigration if she can improve on the answers that I received then?

Sadly, many of the issues that I raised that day are still relevant today, and if anything the situation has deteriorated further and goes beyond the experiences of those in one region of Africa. The Minister will know that at Prime Minister’s questions on 24 October I raised the increasing concerns among academics, the creative industries, businesses, non-governmental organisations and basically anyone and any organisation with links to overseas counterparts who might want to travel to the UK. The experience of the visa system of both individuals and organisations stands in stark contrast to Home Office rhetoric and the Government’s stated ambition of building a “global Britain”. The situations that I hinted at in PMQs barely scratch the surface, but they all exemplify the huge frustrations created by both practical failures in the visa application system and the overall policy failure of what essentially remains a hangover of the hostile environment policy.

Throughout the summer of this year, the media were full of reports of festivals disrupted by the denial of visas to artists from different parts of the world. The director of the Edinburgh international book festival described the problems faced by over a dozen authors seeking to attend as “humiliating”. Peter Gabriel, the founder of WOMAD, expressed alarm after at least three acts were unable to perform, saying that “our UK festival would now have real problems bringing artists into this country,” many of whom “no longer want to come to the UK because of the difficulty, cost and delays with visas, along with the new fear that they will not be welcomed.”

That is borne out by the experience of Celtic Connections, which has been a major highlight of Glasgow’s cultural scene for the past 25 years. Its director Donald Shaw has recently said that visa refusals are undermining the festival’s musical internationalism, and that at least two major world acts have pulled out of next year’s festival simply due to the hassle and stress of the visa application process.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue to the House for its consideration and on his endeavours on behalf of universities and students from all over the world. Does he agree that it is essential to our universities that there is a quick but effective visa system, and that every effort must be made to ensure that the system for applications to study here has top security procedures but at the same time is streamlined and quick?

Patrick Grady: Absolutely, and I will have some examples from my constituency in a couple of moments.
In the debate in June 2016 I listed example after example of delays and denials experienced by members of the Scotland Malawi Partnership. I declare an interest, because the partnership provides pro bono secretariat support to the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, which I chair. The Minister may also know that in February, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) had to raise an urgent case at business questions, because just days before they were due to fly to Scotland a group of Malawian schoolchildren and priests had been denied visas, which they had been assured would be granted, risking thousands of pounds that pupils and families in Scotland had raised to bring them over.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On the point about members of religious faiths, in West Dunbartonshire we have St Margaret of Scotland hospice, run by the Sisters of Charity, who have hospices across the entirety of the UK from Hackney to my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the problems facing us are affecting not only people of religious faith, such as them, but those in hospices across the UK trying to deliver social work, palliative care and frontline services?

Patrick Grady: Absolutely, and I would have thought that if anyone was going to honour their visa requirement to come here for a short period and then go back to their country of origin, it would be members of religious orders whose vows of obedience and stability mean that they need to remain where they are based.

Departments at the University of Glasgow frequently encounter difficulties in bringing over visiting academics. Last year, the Home Office denied a UK entry visa to Dr Nazmi al-Masri, the vice-president for external relations and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) had to raise an urgent case at business questions, because just days before they were due to fly to Scotland a group of Malawian schoolchildren and priests had been denied visas, which they had been assured would be granted, risking thousands of pounds that pupils and families in Scotland had raised to bring them over.

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Departments at the University of Glasgow frequently encounter difficulties in bringing over visiting academics. Last year, the Home Office denied a UK entry visa to Dr Nazmi al-Masri, the vice-president for external relations at the Islamic University of Gaza, despite the fact that he had a 30-year history of entering and returning from the United Kingdom, and that he was due to travel to support research programmes funded by the UK Government’s own research councils. The situation is perverse and the list goes on.

Examples emerge from all around the world on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. No fewer than 17 researchers were reported as being unable to attend the Women Leaders in Global Health Conference hosted by the African Union, who himself had had to produce a bandoned the hostile environment. These are examples of failure across the board: failure of policy and failure of practice.

Will the Minister confirm what the Government’s policy on entry visas actually is? Can she explain why so many stakeholders feel that an effective travel ban is in place for certain countries and regions, particularly Africa and Asia? Can she explain why the reality experienced by so many sponsoring organisations is so different from the rhetoric of global Britain? Will she confirm or deny whether there is any connection with the net migration target and the rates of rejection for visitor visas? Do the Government really believe that everything on these islands is so wonderful that they must presume that everyone who applies for a visa secretly wants to abscond; that musicians, authors, academics, scientists, business owners and senior civil servants will take one look at the streets of mother Britannia paved with gold, and abandon their families and careers for a job in the UK’s gig economy? Laughable although that idea is, that is the impression that is being given.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): As a representative of Scotland’s festival city and as the constituency MP for Edinburgh’s book festival, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on this important debate? Is he aware of any evidence of invited artists absconding during planned visits or festivals, which might explain why things are so much more difficult these days?

Patrick Grady: The short answer to that question is no. Perhaps the Minister has that evidence. Certainly, when I have tried to ask for similar evidence in written questions I have had very little back, because the Government do not seem to keep a track of this data. It is simply a hostile environment hangover.

The policy has to change and that means the practice should also change. The Government need to do more to respect the bona fides of sponsoring organisations. It is not in the interests of festival organisers, universities, churches, or, for example, the City of London Corporation for their guests to abscond. The Government should be prepared, either as a matter of policy or through some kind of formal accreditation, to start from a principle that guests invited by such organisations are coming for good reasons and can be expected to abide by their visa conditions and return in due course.

The Incorporated Society of Musicians has recommended that if freedom of movement for musicians cannot be preserved after Brexit, then the UK and EU should develop a two-year multi-entry touring visa for UK and EU musicians. I know that the City of London Corporation also expects to publish a major report on visas and immigration in the very near future, and I hope the Minister will look out for that and pay attention to its recommendations. I will also send her extensive
know that they would very much appreciate the opportunity have mentioned the all-party group on Malawi. I am also secretary of the all-party group on Africa, and I know that they would very much appreciate the opportunity to discuss this in more detail.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): There is also a huge issue in my constituency with people not getting the visas that they require. The Central Gurdwara Singh Sabha has found it very difficult to get Sikh priests to come over. They have tried on numerous occasions, but they have not got in, which is also a concern of the all-party group on UK Sikhs.

Patrick Grady: There we go, and that goes back to the points made by our hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

What all the stakeholders have told these groups and what all the evidence shows is that the visa processing system also needs to be fit for purpose. The level of detail being requested, sometimes from very senior or very high-profile individuals, as we have heard, has been described as humiliating. In the case of applicants from developing countries, sometimes the information requested is simply impossible to provide. Priests and pupils in remote villages in northern Malawi or elsewhere in Africa may not have bank accounts or birth certificates and almost certainly do not have credit cards or online access to pay the visa processing fees, and neither would they have the means or resources to travel hundreds of miles to a processing centre, sometimes in another country and often on multiple occasions.

Of course, all this takes place in the context of Brexit. We are told that many leave voters voted leave because they wanted freedom of movement to come to an end, but freedom of movement simply cannot come to an end without having any impact on our economy or society. We can all agree that there are different types of movement of people—for labour, for holiday, for family, and for the longer term or the short term. My concern in this debate is largely around very short-term movement, when people enter the country for specific reasons, such as a festival or an academic conference, for a short period of time before returning. Many of the examples, as we have heard, are in any event about visitors from non-EU countries, so they will not be affected by any Brexit withdrawal agreement.

I also accept that those of us who supported, and still support, remaining in the European Union could and should have done a better job of championing the benefits of freedom of movement and immigration, because after all, many people from the UK benefit significantly from ease of travel to the EU and other destinations around the world. The risk of Brexit and the hostile environment more generally is that perhaps the restrictions that the UK Government place on visitors will be increasingly reciprocated elsewhere. Indeed, many UK residents, not least artists and musicians, are already experiencing increasing difficulty applying for entry visas to the United States.

The consequences may be even more far-reaching and unintended. Last year, Corina Cojocaru, Moldova’s economic counsellor to the World Trade Organisation, and her team were denied entry to the UK, even though they wanted to come to discuss their country’s future relationship with Britain after it leaves the European Union. This year, Moldova was one of several countries to question openly the UK’s re-entry to the World Trade Organisation’s Government procurement agreement. Maybe that was just a coincidence, but the examples mount up—case after case of how to lose friends and alienate people, but that seems to be the overall direction of Government policy in a whole range of Departments.

I will not be surprised if the Minister gets up shortly and tells us that all this is imaginary, that statistics show upwards of 80% of visas are granted in a timely and orderly manner, that feedback on experiences in processing centres is positive, and that all these cases and examples are just isolated and can be easily resolved, but I am not sure that is really the case. Even if the approval rate is accurate, how many visas are not being applied for in the first place, or how many fall at the first hurdle? If these examples are just rare, isolated, high-profile cases, why are there so many, why are they so frequent, and why should they require high-level intervention in the media or here on the Floor of the House to resolve them? How many denials or delays do not have the luxury of media or political contacts that can cut through the red tape?

The reality is that the whole immigration system needs root and branch reform, and that includes visitor entry visas. The Minister knows full well that if she does not want it to change, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament would be more than happy to take responsibility and build a system that works for Scotland’s economy and society.

As I said at Prime Minister’s questions, Brexit is a small, isolationist retreat from the world stage. The reality experienced by those going through the visa and immigration system is one of suspicion, frustration and all too frequently, rejection. It is not conducive to growing the economy or building a more tolerant society and it will not be without fundamental change.

How would the Minister feel if the situation were in reverse? If she wanted to visit a country in sub-Saharan Africa, or in years to come wanted to travel to promote her autobiography—about how she survived the final days of the May Administration—or had been invited by a major Government-backed non-governmental organisation in the country concerned, and was asked before she could travel to produce her birth certificate, marriage certificate, bank statements and biometric information, to pay an exorbitant fee and to travel hundreds of miles to do so, perhaps multiple times, and all at risk of being denied because there was a presumption that she would stay in the country and never leave, would she even bother applying for the visa? If she would not want to go through that experience herself, why do the Government continue to inflict it on others?

11.50 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this debate on UK entry visas.
We all know that the United Kingdom is an attractive destination for legitimate travel, and the Government are determined that it stay that way. We want people to come here on holiday, to do business, to visit family, and our immigration system contributes to the prosperity of the UK. We are also keen to ensure that the UK continues to attract the world’s brightest, most talented and most innovative people once we leave the EU. We will continue to be a global, outward-looking nation that is home to the best talent in the world, and our immigration system is fundamental to delivering that ambition. For example, the UK is a global leader in attracting international students, and our student offer is already one of the best on the global market.

That said, we recognise the need for an adaptive immigration system to meet the UK’s needs as we leave the EU. As such, we are designing a future borders and immigration system that will incorporate recommendations made by the Migration Advisory Committee, and we plan to publish further details in the autumn. The Government also have a duty to keep citizens safe and the country secure, and our visa requirements are one of the effective means we have in this regard. They are a valuable tool for the UK in reducing illegal immigration, tackling organised crime, protecting national security and safeguarding vulnerable people.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: On the point about safeguarding, how many nuns, monks and priests have absconded in the last 18 months?

Caroline Nokes: I am aware of that, and I am certainly aware of some of the challenges that have faced a number of cultural festivals, especially during the summer. Although this was not mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), performers arriving from Ireland were particularly affected. We are continuing to review the existing operation and legislation to ensure that the tier 5 route is implemented for, in particular, those who come here to work in the creative industries. Across Government, we are working with the sector to understand the concerns and address them accordingly. In response to its feedback, work is under way to identify an acceptable approach to the tier 5 concession route.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, and his work with that country. I recently accepted an invitation from the Africa all-party parliamentary group to attend a meeting that it is hosting. I think, next month. Today I received another invitation, from the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), who was particularly keen for me to meet representatives of various gurdwaras in his constituency. I recognise the need for me, as Immigration Minister, to engage with APPGs, and I am always happy to do so.

I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the visa application centre in Lilongwe is open five days a week. We offer a priority visa service, with a five to seven-day turnaround time for applications. We also offer an on-demand mobile service. Visa application centre staff travel to the customer’s chosen location to accept applications and assist with the process. In the year ending in June 2018, there were 2,515 decisions on applications from Malawian nationals, and 78%, or 1,963, were accepted. Most of the visas granted were for tourists or students, but our latest online performance statistics show that 98% of visitor and student visas are issued within 15 days.
Patrick Grady: As I said earlier, I will send the Minister some of the documents and evidence that have been produced by the Scotland Malawi Partnership, not least the denial form which contains the words “Reason for denial—insert reason here”. Even when reasons are approved, that often happens very late in the application process, sometimes after the flights on which people have been booked have departed. The Minister needs to look into that a little bit more.

Caroline Nokes: I look forward to receiving the information from the hon. Gentleman, but, as I have said, our statistics show that most visas are being granted within 15 days.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to scientists and academics being refused entry to the UK. Of course we welcome the brightest and the best, allow academics on exchange programmes to come to the UK as visitors, and welcome them to conferences. However, they must meet the requirements of the immigration rules, which apply to all visitors to the UK. Applications for visitor visas, or for entry as a visitor, are considered on their merits regardless of the nationality of the applicant. Among the points on which applicants must satisfy the decision-maker is that they are genuine visitors who will leave at the end of their visit, and will not make the UK their main home through frequent or successive visits—for instance, that they have family, work or study ties in their home country. They must also be able to show that they are able to support and maintain themselves during their visit.

Carol Monaghan: Some of the academics who are being refused visas have visited the UK many times in the past, and only now are their visas being refused for what are really trivial reasons. Does the Minister accept that, as many academics are now saying, massive reputational damage has been done to the UK’s academic sector by this visa regime?

Caroline Nokes: As I have said, it is important that we assess each application on its own merits and on the information provided by individual applicants. It is important that we enable academics to come here, but it is also important that applications be completed in a timely manner and with all the information that we have requested.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned the future for visitors from the European Union and the reciprocal arrangements for UK travellers going to the EU. On 13 November, the European Commission published a proposal to grant UK citizens visa-free travel to the EU after the UK’s withdrawal. This is conditional on the UK also granting reciprocal and non-discriminatory visa-free travel for all EU member states. We welcome the Commission’s proposal, which reflects the future relationship that we want to have with the rest of the EU. In our proposals, we have made it clear that we want to ensure reciprocal measures with the EU on visa-free travel for tourists and short-term business visitors.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: No, I have given way several times this evening.

In conclusion, let me reassure hon. Members that the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that we have a visa system that balances protecting our borders and national security with ensuring that people are welcome and are able to visit, to study and to work in areas where we need their skills. As we leave the EU, we will remain an open and tolerant country that recognises the valuable contribution migrants make to our society and that welcomes those with the skills and expertise to make our nation better still. We will control immigration so that we continue to attract the most talented to work or study in Britain while managing the process properly so that our immigration system serves the national interest. We are carefully considering a range of options for the future immigration system and will set out proposals very shortly. We will want to ensure that any decisions on our long-term arrangements are based on evidence and on engagement.

Question put and agreed to.

11.16 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 20 November 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Solar Generation

1. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What his Department’s policy is on rooftop solar.  

11. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the potential merits of providing remuneration at a fair market rate for self-generators of solar power putting surplus energy on the networks.

24. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What progress he has made on his proposals on the solar export tariff.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): The Government and my Department remain enthusiastic about the role of solar generation and its role in decarbonising power in the UK. However, as the market matures and installation is now possible without Government subsidy, we believe that it is the right time to close the feed-in tariff scheme. We already have 13 GW of solar capacity supported under current schemes. Indeed, at one point in May this year, solar provided more power generation than any other source.

Kevin Hollinrake: Rooftop solar is set to lose support from the feed-in tariff and the export tariff, which help to pay for clean power to the grid. Does my right hon. Friend agree that householders should expect some form of payment rather than simply subsidising large energy companies?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner who we consider a new scheme, as the cost has fallen. However, I do completely agree that solar power should not be provided to the grid for free, and that is why I will shortly be announcing the next steps for small-scale renewables.

Mr Speaker: I call Daniel Kawczynski. He is not here. Mr Richard Graham. Not here. I hope that neither of the Members concerned is indisposed. It is most unlike them not to be present, but they were informed of the grouping, I am sure, by the Government. [Interruption.] Okay—thank you. Well, never mind—they are not here and we cannot take them, but other Members are here, and we are delighted to see it. Mr David Hanson.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The number of installations under solar has fallen by 90% in the past two years. Taking up the point made by the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), what steps is the Minister taking to ensure, first, that providers are still in place next year to continue to grow this sector; and secondly, that customers are not subsidising large energy companies?

Claire Perry: The good news, as I mentioned, is that we have moved from a position of heavy—very expensive—subsidy for many of these small-scale schemes. Because the cost of solar installations has dropped by more than two thirds, we think it is right to change that. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to welcome the news that a string of private sector subsidy-free solar funds is set to open this year, particularly with business premises now taking advantage of the benefits that solar can provide in balancing their own systems. We are going through that transition with the expectation that we will see more solar deployed next year than we have previously.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If we are really serious about rooftop solar, why do we not insist that it is fitted on all new build properties?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for all forms of renewable energy in Kettering, and he is right. There are many ways to bring forward better low-carbon generation—but, equally, better energy efficiency measures—in new builds. We have set out plans under the clean growth strategy to try to achieve those ends, and I am looking forward to delivering them.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I invite the Minister to be far more ambitious for rooftop solar as PV prices continue to fall and as batteries to store surplus solar power become ever more competitively priced. The opportunity for many homes to become their own power station has arrived. Should we not therefore be planning and encouraging such an exciting outcome?

Claire Perry: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, whose activities in coalition contributed to a boom in some of the cheapest forms of renewable energy, including offshore wind. We are now able to generate over 30% of our energy supply from renewables, which is much cheaper than putting it on individual rooftops. He raises a really important point. As our energy system migrates to a much more decentralised, much more intelligent system—helped, I might add, by the roll-out of smart meters—there is real value in that micro-generation, and that is what I am hoping to support when I bring proposals to the House shortly.

Mr Speaker: It is very heartwarming to see that the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) has now beetled into the Chamber. I am sure that the House and an expectant nation wish to hear him.
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker.

I think my right hon. Friend the Minister, who has done a lot to support renewable energy, may have covered my key point. However, does she agree that there are hundreds of churches, schools, local authorities and co-operative groups around the country, not least in my own constituency of Gloucester, that will benefit hugely from her announcement of what will replace the current system, and that it would be totally wrong for energy companies to benefit from free energy were there not to be a replacement system?

Claire Perry: I hope my hon. Friend caught my point that I agree it would be wrong to have power provided to the grid for free. In his constituency, there are now more than 1,300 feed-in tariff installations, and he should be proud of that. He is right; there are many such organisations. I was lucky to meet a group of people from all different faiths who were really committed to a zero-carbon future in many places of worship. That is happening right across the country. There is value in that, and we want to see it continue.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Scotland is the home of energy innovation, and a lot of that is down to EU funding for the innovation and research that is taking place. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that funding for the Scottish renewables sector is protected after Brexit?

Claire Perry: I encourage the hon. Lady to move away from defining success as the amount of subsidy that renewable energy receives. In fact, thanks to incredible policy work and innovation by the suppliers, Scotland, like other areas, has benefited from a rapid decline in energy costs. We will continue to invest in clean growth—more than £2.5 billion over the course of this Parliament—and we will all benefit from those jobs and the renewable energy that those installations provide.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Minister, I know the House will want to join me in welcoming Speaker Elisabetta Casellati of the Italian Senate—a distinguished parliamentarian and the first female holder of that office. Madam Speaker, we wish you and your colleagues well on this visit and in all the important work that you do.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): The Government say in their clean growth plan—indeed, the Minister has said it this morning—that they want to buy their energy. I look forward to announcing further deliberations on this shortly.

The hon. Gentleman and I are, as in many cases, in violent agreement. We signalled clearly several years ago the closure of this scheme. It is a very expensive scheme; it was going to cost £2 billion a year for decades to come to bring forward microgeneration. We now have much more energy-efficient and cost-effective ways of generating renewables. As I said, I absolutely agree that people who have gone through the installation process should not be captive takers, should someone want to buy their energy. I look forward to announcing further deliberations on this shortly.

Nuclear Power

2. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What steps he is taking to secure the future of nuclear power in the UK.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government believe that nuclear power has an important role to play in our energy system as part of a diverse range of low-carbon technologies. Our intent is clearly visible in the form of Hinkley Point C—the first new nuclear power station to be built in this country in a generation—as well as in the launch in June of our landmark nuclear sector deal at Trawsfynydd.

Trudy Harrison: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. It is reassuring to me to understand this Government’s commitment to new nuclear, but with Toshiba’s recent decision to wind down NuGen, can he assure me that he will meet any developer who is interested in building their reactors at Moorside in Copeland?

Greg Clark: I can indeed give that assurance to my hon. Friend, who is a great champion of one of the bastions of skills and innovation in the nuclear sector in this country. The circumstances behind Toshiba’s wind-down of NuGen are well known—it was because of the move to chapter 11 bankruptcy of its subsidiary—but that site is now available for other investors.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The future of nuclear power is not just about building reactors; it is about having people with the skills to work in those reactors as well. As we have a skills gap in defence nuclear, can the Secretary of State set out what actions the Government are taking to support the growth of nuclear skills in both defence nuclear and civil nuclear?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman takes such an interest in this. He will know that the nuclear sector deal provides for training, new institutions and new apprenticeship and scholarship opportunities for nuclear engineers in both the civil and defence sectors. This is all part of an agreement across the industry with Government to ensure that the next generation of nuclear power is supported by new-generation nuclear engineers and technicians.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The Government were very keen to emphasise that the Toshiba-Korea Electric Power Corporation negotiations over NuGen were a commercial matter. If the Chinese nuclear company
Greg Clark: As my hon. Friend knows, in each case the proposals are developer-led, so it is for proponents to come forward. As I have said to our hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), I am very happy, with my officials, to meet anyone who has an interest in doing so.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The demise of Moorside and NuGen underlines how the Government’s nuclear policy hinges on overseas investment, particularly from energy companies that are owned wholly by other states. Is the Secretary of State having a really good look at the other planned nuclear power stations to make sure that there will be enough nuclear power to maintain energy integrity in the UK in future?

Greg Clark: The answer is yes. I am grateful to the hon. Lady’s Public Accounts Committee for examining the model for financing nuclear new build. With her colleagues, she has made some helpful suggestions, which she knows we are committed to taking forward to see whether they can be viable.

National Minimum Wage

3. Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): What steps is he taking to remind employers of their obligation to pay the national minimum wage. [907692]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): We are committed to ensuring all employers pay their workers correctly. As part of our enforcement strategy, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs targets employers with information and advice. In April 2018, we launched a £1.48 million campaign to raise awareness of the national minimum wage rules, particularly in sectors with a high risk of non-compliance. HMRC contacted over 617,000 employers prior to April 2018, reminding them of their responsibilities to pay the higher rate.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: The Government are failing thousands of workers who are falling victim to unpaid trial shifts. The law is extremely grey, and despite my efforts to clear it up, the hon. Lady’s Government talked out my Bill. We know that the guidance the Government produce and reminding employers is not enough. As we go into this Christmas period, when this will be another employment epidemic, will she pledge to make this the last Christmas of the unpaid trial shift?

Kelly Tolhurst: Short unpaid trials as part of a genuine recruitment process can be legal. However, longer trials with no prospect of employment are illegal. Individuals working on illegal trials are workers and they are entitled to the minimum wage. I can inform the hon. Gentleman that, as per the communication I have had with him in recent months, I have indeed, with my Department, just reviewed and finalised new guidance on unpaid work trials and work experience for interns, which will be published in the next few weeks.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting that point, and it is absolutely true. This Government are committed to increasing the rate of pay for the lowest-paid workers. I do agree with him that this of course encourages employee loyalty to employers that do so.

19. [907709] Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): A constituent of mine who runs a vehicle delivery company came to see me about the dangerously long hours of driving in his industry—often over 16 hours a day—for less than the minimum wage. My constituent and other small companies that care about their staff are desperate to see an end to bogus self-employment in their sectors. When will the Government finally act on the recommendations of the Taylor review and do this?

Kelly Tolhurst: Let me be clear: it is illegal not to pay the national minimum wage to workers who are entitled to it. This Government have been very clear. We are looking at and currently reviewing the Taylor review recommendations—we will be implementing the majority of them—and the Government will be responding soon with what we will do.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George), last week yet another employment tribunal found in favour of workers getting the minimum wage and other workplace rights—in this instance, at Addison Lee—but too many firms continue to label workers as self-employed when they are not. When will the Government finally bring forward this long overdue legislation and—as the Taylor review, the GMB union and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee have argued—ensure that all workers are paid the minimum wage?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady will remember that it was this Government that set up the Taylor review. We have been very clear. We are committed to enforcement; we have doubled the enforcement budget for the national minimum wage. In fact, the arrears recovered in the last year totalled £15.6 million, affecting more than 200,000 workers. This Government are committed and we will respond in due course. We are committed to making all workplaces fair for all.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): If the Minister is very keen on the national minimum wage, what is she saying to Mike Ashley, who has 3,000 workers at Shirebrook, most of them on zero-hours contracts? They do not get the national minimum wage. There are only a handful. Is it not time that this Government, instead of talking about the national minimum wage, did something about it?

Kelly Tolhurst: I say again: we are committed to enforcing on underpayments of the national minimum wage. We have doubled the enforcement budget. We are delivering for those individuals. And zero-hours contracts...
do not necessarily mean that there will be a breach of the national minimum wage. We are committed to delivering.

**Leaving the EU: Manufacturing Jobs**

4. Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help safeguard skilled manufacturing jobs after the UK leaves the EU. [R07694]

17. Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to safeguard manufacturing jobs after the UK leaves the EU. [R07707]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): The declaration on the future relationship with the EU sets out a joint ambition for zero tariffs and restrictions in goods trade, and an ambitious customs arrangement. Our industrial strategy will ensure that the UK remains one of the most competitive locations in the world for manufacturing. We have committed £140 million to the “Made Smarter” industrial digitalisation programme, which will help our manufacturing sector adopt new technologies and skills.

Sarah Jones: The Minister mentions the declaration, but of course it is seven pages long and offers no reassurance to businesses in Croydon. Recently I visited a Croydon business that is currently looking to move to Amsterdam. What more can the Government provide to ensure that that business and many more stay in the UK?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady’s constituency must contain businesses different from those I heard at the CBI yesterday, where the Prime Minister was applauded for precisely this approach; different from businesses in my constituency; and different from all the business leaders who have supported the Government’s proposed deal with the European Union.

Preet Kaur Gill: Manufacturing accounts for 11% of jobs in the west midlands, one of the highest percentages for any region, and the region has one of the highest shares of goods imports and exports—47% of its goods go to the EU. Does the Minister agree that Labour’s plan for Brexit, guaranteeing a new, comprehensive and permanent customs union and a strong single market relationship that allows British business continued access to European markets for both goods and services, is the deal that UK manufacturers need to thrive?

Richard Harrington: As far as I am aware, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and the EEF, the manufacturers’ organisation, and all other organisations representing those industries in the midlands, in the hon. Lady’s constituency and surrounding constituencies, are very much in support of the Government’s policy for frictionless trade in the future.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Secretary of State is aware of the threat to 190 skilled engineering jobs at GE Energy in Rugby. This has nothing to do with Brexit; rather, it is to do with a downturn in activity of the company’s traditional base. What advice can the Minister provide to the workforce and the local management team to secure this manufacturing activity in Rugby?

Richard Harrington: As ever, my hon. Friend is fully in support of so many businesses in his constituency. As he knows, my door is open to him and the company, to discuss any possibilities of helping them. I have seen many very good businesses in his constituency and I am excited about the prospects there for high-quality employment for his constituents.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The question is really whether we leave the EU at all. Yesterday, on the “Today” programme, the Secretary of State was arguing in favour of a proposal by the EU to extend the implementation period to the end of 2022. Was the Secretary of State doing his usual EU freelancing, or is that now the official policy of the UK Government?

Richard Harrington: The Government want to finalise the future trading relationship with the EU as quickly as possible. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned one alternative to achieve that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In addition to the threat that leaving the EU poses to skilled manufacturing jobs, the Minister will be aware of the devastating news that Michelin plans to close its factory in Dundee, threatening 850 such jobs. Will the Minister work closely with the Scottish Government to ensure a future for that plant?

Richard Harrington: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have spoken to the company and I have sought assurances about support available to staff. The Secretary of State and I have spoken with the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work and with the Secretary of State for Scotland. The Department is playing an active role in the Dundee action group.

Drew Hendry: I thank the Minister for that answer, but his Government can do one thing right away to give immediate and future help. The UK Government are currently £50 million short on matching the Scottish Government on the Tay cities deal. Is this to be, like Aberdeen, Inverness and Stirling, part of a near £400 million shortage of match funding and a failure of the UK Government on city deals, or will he do the right thing and fight for match funding to support Dundee at this challenging time?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, each deal with each city is an individual one based on the circumstances of that city. I see him regularly, and it would be a pleasure to meet him to discuss his constituency and the proposed city deal.

18. [R07708][R] Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In terms of leaving the EU and our manufacturing sector, does the Minister not accept that staying in the customs union and in a form of single market is absolutely what is demanded in the long term—not “xx”—by our manufacturing sector?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman must be aware that the EEF has warmly accepted the Government’s proposals for a future trading relationship that will provide the kind of frictionless trade essential for his constituents and everyone else who works in the motor vehicle industry and the manufacturing sector.
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): “High tech manufacturing in every part of the country”—the Secretary of State’s words. General Electric is closing in Rugby and Michelin is closing in Dundee. From Swansea to Copeland to Lowestoft, his energy policies destroy more jobs than they create. By ending the enhanced capital allowance, the Budget took hundreds of millions of pounds from manufacturers, while doling out billions in corporate tax cuts. Manufacturing demand is now dropping at its fastest rate since 2015, yet the Cabinet is in meltdown over whether to walk out on the customs union in four months with no deal or in 24 months with the Prime Minister’s plan. Does the Minister agree that a permanent customs union is essential for British manufacturing and British jobs?

Richard Harrington: It will come as no surprise to you, Mr Speaker, that I disagree with a lot of what the hon. Lady has said. She says the Cabinet is in meltdown. It is not. The Cabinet is not in meltdown. On her substantive question about energy, to the best of my knowledge, offshore energy is producing a lot of jobs, including in Tyneside. It very much is. She must be aware, as far as the customs union is part of her question is concerned, of the importance of the Government’s proposals, which provide the benefit of a very close relationship with all the countries in the EU. They also mean that this country will be able to enter into negotiations to sign free trade agreements with countries all over the world.

Asda/Sainsbury Merger

5. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the merger of Asda and Sainsbury’s on (a) workers, (b) supply chains and (c) consumers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Sainsbury’s has confirmed that there are no planned store closures as a result of the merger. The independent Competition and Markets Authority is investigating the effects on competition and has until 5 March 2019 to report. The CMA’s investigation is independent of Government and we must not pre-judge the inquiry. The Secretary of State wrote to the CMA in May on this issue and I met with the CEO of Sainsbury’s last month.

Gerald Jones: Sainsbury’s has indicated that it will look at price cuts of 10% under a merger with Asda, but it has also indicated that it would make efficiency savings of around £500 million. I know from this Government’s record that efficiency savings often mean cuts somewhere down the line, so what discussions has the Minister or the Department had with trade unions to ensure that all jobs—not just in store, but in distribution and warehousing—are safeguarded?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise concerns, because any merger and change will of course concern the workers in the organisations, but I have spoken with Sainsbury’s and it has been clear that the pay and reward structure that is already in place is not affected as part of the merger. We will continue our communications with the stores. As he will know, the CMA is currently looking at the merger and is due to report. We will be monitoring this, as we would in any such circumstances.

James Cleverly (Br奈tree) (Con): The National Farmers Union has expressed disquiet at this proposed merger. Will my hon. Friend give an assurance to me and to the House more generally that the Government will always promote competition both to improve choice for the consumer and to improve options for people in the supply chain, particularly in farming?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right: one of the things that we are committed to is making sure that we continue with our world-renowned competition regime. It is right that, even at a ministerial level, we are independent of the CMA, but we work very closely with the CMA on priorities, and looking at supply chains is a key area for all mergers, as is how we protect consumers and markets in future.

Shared Parental Leave: Self-employed People

6. Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent representations he has received on introducing shared parental leave for self-employed people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): My Department and the Department for Work and Pensions recently met Parental Pay Equality, which is campaigning to extend shared parental pay to self-employed parents through changes to maternity allowance. We are exploring ways to support self-employed parents further.

Kevin Brennan: I thank the Minister for that answer. Has she read the recent “Balancing Act” report from Birkbeck University and Parents in Performing Arts, which shows that 72% of freelancers would like to take shared parental leave if they were allowed to? This policy would not cost anything, but it would improve equality and productivity at the same time. Will she—not just officials—undertake to meet the parental pay and leave campaign and listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who has a ten-minute rule Bill on this issue?

Kelly Tolhurst: I will always engage with anyone who has a view on this particular issue. We are evaluating shared parental leave and pay to look at the barriers to take-up, including those affecting self-employed people and mothers, particularly, who qualify for maternity allowance. We are currently evaluating that and we will be reporting on that next year. However, I will meet with those people.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I recently met Mike Watkinson from Nottinghamshire’s Federation of Small Businesses to discuss a number of challenges facing business in Mansfield, one of which was support and access to benefits for self-employed people. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as the party of business, it is absolutely vital that we help small business owners and support them to keep the show on the road when they need it?
Kelly Tolhurst: Self-employment does allow the flexibility that some employed workers are unable to take advantage of, but it is right that we work on this and consider the consequences for the self-employed and small businesses. When we are evaluating and looking at how we move forward—as this Government are committed to doing—it is right that we look at this in the round, in the context of tax, benefit and other such things, but particularly, to support small businesses to continue providing the employment that we need.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my colleague and friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), for raising this question. On my ten-minute rule Bill on shared parental leave, the Minister will have heard across the House the frustration with the Taylor review—that it has been a year and a half and we have not had any implementations of those recommendations. This was one of them; it is cost-neutral. Does the Minister agree that this could be the engine of change—it could be the outlier—that actually gets those recommendations put into place?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting this issue through her Bill. We have not yet had the opportunity to debate it, but I know she met Ministers earlier in the year to discuss it. She has mentioned the Taylor review. We are committed in the very near future to doing that, and we are considering self-employment, especially with regard to shared parental leave, how we can benefit and more people taking it up.

Industrial Strategy

7. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What is the timetable for bringing forward a tourism sector deal under the industrial strategy?

Richard Harrington: Actually, I correct my right hon. Friend. I said that six sector deals had been concluded and more are in the pipeline. They are very complex. They involve a lot of industry money and many industrial partners who have never been involved in deals with the Government before. I would be delighted to meet him at any time to discuss how I am pushing these on as quickly as I can.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that tourism, just like the manufacturing sector, particularly in Yorkshire, is finding it very difficult to get skilled people, especially as more Europeans go back to their home countries in fear of Brexit? What is he going to do about attracting and retaining skilled workers in tourism and manufacturing?

Richard Harrington: I am very aware of the hon. Gentleman’s point. Only last week, I met with Hilton Hotels and Resorts, a big employer in this sector, while the Grove, in my own constituency, has raised exactly the same point. The industry has a high turnover of labour and, as he says, has depended for some time on labour from abroad. I hope that more UK people will enter the hotel and hospitality industry, but the fact is that in many areas there is almost full employment.

Post Office Closures

8. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): What discussions has his Department had with representatives of the Post Office on its plans to close 74 Crown offices.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): What discussions his Department has had with representatives of the Post Office on plans to close 74 Crown post offices.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the (a) adequacy of terms of the proposed sale of Crown post offices and (b) effect of that sale on sub-post offices.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): While the Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office, they allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business. The 74 Crown branches are being franchised to WHSmith, either on-site or through relocation to a WHSmith store. There will be no reduction in the number of branches from the franchising with WHSmith.
Hugh Gaffney: I am a proud member of the Communication Workers Union and a former postal worker. The Minister has said in written answers to Members that the privatisation of the Post Office is a commercial decision for the Post Office and that the Government only set the strategic direction. Nevertheless, the Post Office has decided to privatised these Crown branches and is using tens of millions of pounds of public money to bankroll it. This is a disgraceful situation. When will the Government start exercising some basic financial oversight?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am sorry, but I entirely disagree with the hon. Gentleman. We have no closure programmes. I should add that under Labour’s management of the Post Office its network shrank by 37%, which resulted in 7,000 closures, and that in the first five years of Labour Government the Post Office went from being in profit to having losses of more than £1 billion.

James Frith: Let us have another look at this, shall we? Seventy-four of the public’s post offices are being privatised without the permission of the public. WHSmith is already advertising minimum wage part-time roles to take over post office counters, while consultations on those jobs have yet to be completed. Can the Minister imagine what it must feel like for your job to be under consultation and to face possible redundancy, with the job already advertised for someone else? Will she intervene and call this practice out, as a matter of principle?

Kelly Tolhurst: Let me first highlight the fact that there are no Crown post offices in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Franchising is one of the measures to support and maintain the long-term sustainability of our network of 11,500 post offices throughout the country. As I said, the network was reduced under the last Labour Government, but we are committed to the Post Office and to keeping those branches open.

Ian C. Lucas: Restrictive practices are preventing my constituent Mr Avi Bungar from providing various post programme for the Post Office against potential postmasters is quite frankly wrong. This is part of a sustainable nuclear power stations.

Kelly Tolhurst: I respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman has experienced issues in his constituency in relation to a particular post office, but to set a long-term sustainability programme for the Post Office against potential postmasters is quite frankly wrong. This is part of a sustainable programme that will enable us—this Government—to keep 11,500 post offices open, to increase, via the Post Office, the pay to which post office workers are entitled, and to give them longer hours and better locations.

Nuclear Power Stations

9. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that value for money is achieved from energy generated from proposed new nuclear power stations.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): As the Secretary of State said in his statement to the House on 4 June, in our negotiations with nuclear developers, a key focus of discussions will be achieving value for money and lower electricity costs for consumers.

Alan Brown: The National Audit Office has already confirmed that Hinkley Point C was a bad deal. Half the existing nuclear power stations will have closed by 2024 and the rest by 2028, and no nuclear power stations can be built in time to replace them. Why are the UK Government tying up energy policy for the next 50 years in deals that are poor value for money?

Richard Harrington: As far as I know, the hon. Gentleman and his party are against nuclear power altogether, so his is an interesting question. The Government, on the other hand, are committed to a diverse energy mix in which nuclear power plays a crucial part. Nuclear power is critical to our transmission to a low-carbon society, providing continuous, reliable, low-carbon electricity. We are also leaders in cutting emissions by renewables, and nearly 30% of our electricity comes from renewable sources.

Hydraulic Fracturing

10. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce the incidence of seismic activity caused by hydraulic fracturing.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is always a pleasure to answer a question from my mother-in-law’s MP. As he knows, we have always made it clear that any hydraulic fracturing that takes place under current licences must be consistent with our regulatory regime, including the traffic light system, which is the toughest in the world. The Preston New Road site is the most monitored site for seismic activity, and among the 36 events recorded, the 1.1 local magnitude event was the equivalent at the surface of a bag of flour being dropped to the floor.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is looking after the Minister’s mother-in-law, because I have a feeling that he will hear about it if he is not.

Mr Cunningham: I always do my best for all my constituents, Mr Speaker; I do not have any favourites. On fracking in the Blackpool area, there have been 47 minor earthquakes in that area and Cuadrilla has now ceased operations. Does that signal a change in Government policy?

Claire Perry: Not at all. Thanks to the superb seismic monitoring and the work of some excellent students at Liverpool University, it is clear that the most significant of the micro tremors that we are seeing is the equivalent of dropping a kilogram of flour on my mother-in-law’s floor in Earlsdon and feeling the vibration from that.

We are calmly and soberly going through the process of seeing whether this potentially valuable resource that can reduce our energy dependency on imports can be exploited, but it has to be done in a way that is consistent with our world-beating and tough regulatory regime.
**Starting and Growing Businesses**

12. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What progress he has made on meeting the Government’s ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business. [907702]

14. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What progress he has made on meeting the Government’s ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business. [907704]

15. **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): What progress he has made on meeting the Government’s ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business. [907705]

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):** Our business environment is among the best in the world for small businesses. We have 16.3 million people employed in small businesses and the British Business Bank is supporting small businesses with over £5.5 billion of finance—and colleagues on all sides of the House will wish to support small business Saturday on 1 December.

**Mrs Murray:** Earlier this year, Ideal Foods, a small business in my constituency, celebrated a huge milestone when it achieved a turnover of £10 million in just one year. Another business, the Cornish Cheese Company, has just been awarded the super gold award for its Cornish blue cheese. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these are shining examples of the importance of embracing global trade after we leave the European Union?

**Greg Clark:** I do indeed, and I congratulate Ideal Foods and the Cornish Cheese Company. Perhaps I can add one of my own: Cornish Charcuterie, based just outside Bude, is one of my favourites, and I know that it has many satisfied customers across the UK and Europe, and increasingly around the world. This shows that, of all the manifold assets that Cornwall has, its food and indeed its drink are something to boast about.

**Rachel Maclean:** More than 355 new businesses have been started up in my constituency since 2010. Many of them are microbusinesses with only one or two employees, and their needs are very different from those of the larger small and medium-sized businesses. What additional support can the Department give to those microbusinesses to help them to thrive?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to suggest that microbusinesses, and indeed start-ups, sometimes face challenges in accessing finance. The British Business Bank has a programme to focus on microbusinesses. Start-up loans, from which 44 businesses in her constituency have benefited, are also important.

**Victoria Prentis:** Late payments are a real problem for small businesses. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to tackle that?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and she will know that we are taking steps to reinforce in statute some of the measures that have been good
practice across the industry. Indeed, the small business commissioner has been appointed to the prompt payment code compliance board to help with that.

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State truly believe that what has been negotiated with the European Union will be better for jobs and business than the deal we have now?

**Greg Clark:** If the hon. Lady was at the CBI conference yesterday, and if she has read the responses from businesses small and large up and down the country, she will know that they are very clear that this deal will help to create the confidence that will allow investment to be made and jobs to be created and preserved across the country.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The small businesses and manufacturers in my constituency are telling me that their biggest challenge right now is recruiting skilled labour. That challenge is set to get worse for them as we approach Brexit. Will the Secretary of State explain to them how stopping freedom of movement is going to help them with access to skilled labour for their manufacturing and their research and development?

**Greg Clark:** One of the reasons why companies up and down the country sometimes find it a struggle to recruit people is that we have such a low level of unemployment in this country. I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would recognise that. He knows that one of the benefits of leaving the European Union is that our migration policy will be set in this country according to the needs of our economy—so it’s over to us.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s botched Brexit deal creates uncertainty for business. The lack of any commitment to permanent customs arrangements means that there is no guarantee of tariff-free, frictionless trade. Frankly, I am amazed that any Business Secretary would put their name to this deal. Without any commitments to frictionless trade, how can the Government claim to be helping business?

**Greg Clark:** I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has read the proposed agreement, but business leaders certainly have, and they have been warmly supportive of it. There are good reasons for that. One of the things that businesses have asked for is a transition period leading up to an agreement that we should be able to trade without tariffs, without quotas and without frictions. This agreement provides for that, which is one reason why it has been endorsed by businesses up and down the country.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We come now to topical questions, and I gently remind the House that topicals are supposed to be much shorter than substantives, so we do not want preambles. Members who start to engage in preambles will be asked to resume their seat. With straightforward questions and straightforward replies, we will rip through as many as we possibly can.

### Topical Questions

T1. [907715] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy** (Greg Clark): The recent Budget confirmed our unwavering commitment to the technologies of the future. We have set up a national quantum computing centre and five new technology centres in Leeds, Oxford, Coventry, Glasgow and London. At the national level, the Prime Minister joined the first meeting of the Industrial Strategy Council. Internationally, I travelled to Japan to discuss how we can work together on our industrial strategy.

**Theresa Villiers:** Has any estimate been made of the number of businesses on local high streets that can benefit from the business rate cut announced in the Budget, including businesses in my constituency of Chipping Barnet?

**Greg Clark:** My right hon. Friend will be aware that up to 90% of retail properties in England could be eligible, and I understand that up to around 3,000 properties in her borough could qualify for the relief made available in the Budget.
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Brexit cannot result in a race to the bottom for workers’ rights and protections but, sadly, the EU withdrawal agreement does not guarantee that it will not. Thompsons Solicitors says that the non-regression clause will be “ineffective” and the Institute for Public Policy Research states that it is “not sufficient to maintain current protections”. Individuals will not even be able to bring about proceedings, and if the EU raises standards, the UK is permitted simply to fall behind. When the Secretary of State called stakeholders after agreeing the deal last week, were trade unions on that call? Will he confirm exactly how he intends to maintain current standards and enforceability and to prevent Britain from falling behind the EU’s standards?

Greg Clark: I note that the hon. Lady dismissed the withdrawal agreement on the airwaves before she had even read it, so it does not surprise me that her question is so misplaced. As for the trade unions, I met Frances O’Grady, the general secretary of the TUC, to discuss the provisions of the agreement in person. When it comes to our record of protecting employees’ rights, the hon. Lady should have more confidence in this country and in this House. We are perfectly capable. We have been leaders in protecting and promoting workplace rights for many generations. We do not need to be required to do so by the European Union; this House can do that itself.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The trade unions were not on that call, which is telling. However, many workers are being treated shamefully even before we leave the EU. There is a bank branch where male workers were expected to urinate in a bucket, and cleaners and security staff are on poverty wages with few rights and protections. The first case was highlighted by Unite yesterday, but the second can be found in the Government’s own Departments under the watch of this Secretary of State, who is responsible for employment rights and protections. Given that the Taylor review was published nearly 500 days ago and yet we still have no update on Government policy and that two months have passed without action since I wrote to the Secretary of State about the treatment of his own staff, how can we trust him to protect workers in the UK now, let alone stop a race to the bottom?

Greg Clark: We value highly the colleagues in our Department and across Government who do important work in public service, and I have made a commitment that we will always treat them well, including on pay and conditions. I am glad that the hon. Lady is looking forward with anticipation to the publication of the response to the Taylor review. It was a landmark report to which this Government committed, and I look forward to her endorsing this Government when we enact Taylor’s recommendations in the weeks ahead.

T3. [907717] Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I have recently had the honour of visiting many of our businesses in Clacton. Some of them are searching for business overseas, but they remain concerned about Brexit. What can my right hon. Friend do or say to reassure them?

Greg Clark: Businesses up and down the country have been very clear: they want an agreement; they want a deal so that they have the certainty to be able to make investments; they want a transition period so that they are able to make the necessary adjustments; and they want frictionless trade. The proposed deal comprises all those qualities, which is why it has had such a warm endorsement. It will give businesses in my hon. Friend’s constituency and elsewhere the confidence to invest.

T2. [907716] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Which?, the consumer champion, points out that large suppliers need to install 30 smart meters a minute every day for the next two years to meet the Government’s 2020 roll-out target. How does the Minister think this is going?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): I applaud the hon. Gentleman for his long-standing interest in this important area. It is going better by the day. Over 400,000 smart meters are now being installed every month. As of the end of October, some 97,500 SMETS2 meters, including one in my home in Devizes, have been installed. He will know better than many about the long-term benefits that this brings, both to people’s ability to control and reduce their energy use, and to delivering the most efficient and digitised energy system in the world.

T5. [907719] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Taunton would be the ideal place for the one of the Geospatial Commission’s geospatial hubs, building on the expertise of the UK Hydrographic Office’s oceanic data-gathering skills. Will the Minister agree to visit Taunton to consider this proposal?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I will always be delighted to visit Taunton—my hon. Friend is a great champion of her constituency. My Department is now engaging at official level to understand how these prospective developments could fit with the industrial strategy.

T4. [907718] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Eighty-two per cent. of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, many with immense potential, say that they find business to be inaccessible. I tabled early-day motion 1807 in support of the Movement to Work charity for young people. How will Ministers help to unleash the entrepreneurial potential of young people from all backgrounds?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The right hon. Gentleman raises a great question, and this is one of the things we are working on. The British Business Bank is working on start-up loans, and there are initiatives that work on enterprise in the school setting. I left school and went into an unofficial apprenticeship, and I think that we should all get behind such schemes and apprenticeships, because getting into work really can deliver the entrepreneurial spirit that people need.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Last week, the first new major hotel to be built on Paignton seafront in decades was approved, bringing with it £40 million of investment.
What role does my right hon. Friend see the industrial strategy playing in supporting more high-value investment in Torbay’s tourism industry?

Mr Gyimah: I congratulate Paignton on that new hotel. Through the industrial strategy, we are investing in digital connectivity and transport, which should make areas such as Torbay even more attractive than at present.

T6. [907720] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Given that the regulation of fireworks is reserved to this place and that there appears to be a spike in the use of fireworks as part of antisocial behaviour and violence, including of late in Plains, Shotts and Airdrie in my constituency, what cognisance will the UK Government take of the Scottish Government’s consultation on regulating fireworks so as better to inform how best to regulate the sale and use of fireworks?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which is timely just after fireworks night. The Government do not have any plans to change the legislation, but I am always willing to look at new evidence and to discuss the issue with hon. Members.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Lithium extraction has the potential to make a significant contribution to the aims of our industrial strategy, as well as being a huge boost to the Cornish economy. May I invite the Secretary of State to meet businesses that are seeking to exploit this new opportunity? If he would like to come to Cornwall to do that, he would be very welcome.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My hon. Friend should know that I would be delighted to meet him, and anybody he thinks is suitable, in order to achieve the exploitation of the luxurious resources deep in his constituency.

T7. [907722] James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): After the capital shortfall warnings issued by Interserve this week, what assurances can the Secretary of State give the House that Interserve will not go the way of Carillion?

Kelly Tolhurst: I was worried that the hon. Lady would not be called; I wanted to save the announcement up for her. The hon. Lady will know, along with her neighbours, the vital role this industry has played in rejuvenating businesses in her constituency and next door. One ask of this sector deal, on which we are in the final stages, is to ensure that the operators, which are benefiting from the Government’s contribution to the auctions, are making substantial commitments to bring back technology and investment, as we see with the Siemens wind turbine factory in her next-door constituency and today’s announcement on the Vestas plant, with another 1,100 jobs being created thanks to the expansion of this industry.

Mr Speaker: I call Dan Carden.

T8. [907723] Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Cammell Laird has won £619 million of RAF contracts, but almost 300 of its workforce, some of whom are my constituents, are at risk of redundancy. Will the Secretary of State speak to Defence Ministers to make sure that the Government will step in to fill any gap?

Richard Harrington: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I have met the chief executive of Cammell Laird, and I am in discussions with the Ministry of Defence and all other interested parties.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State’s Green Paper “Modernising consumer markets”. When is a Government response expected? Does he agree that, from mobile phone bills to foreign currency exchange, we should use transparency and competition to end consumer rip-offs?

Greg Clark: I agree with my right hon. Friend and I welcome his distinguished contribution to that consultation. We will be responding during the weeks ahead. It is very important that we build on our tradition of being one of the most open markets in the world, in which incumbents should not be protected from competition.

T9. [907724] Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth mentioned that it is Offshore Wind Week this week, and her comments will be welcome news. What are the Government doing to increase local employment opportunities in this very innovative sector?

Claire Perry: I was worried that the hon. Lady would not be called; I wanted to save the announcement up for her.

The hon. Lady will know, along with her neighbours, the vital role this industry has played in rejuvenating businesses in her constituency and next door. One ask of this sector deal, on which we are in the final stages, is to ensure that the operators, which are benefiting from the Government’s contribution to the auctions, are making substantial commitments to bring back technology and investment, as we see with the Siemens wind turbine factory in her next-door constituency and today’s announcement on the Vestas plant, with another 1,100 jobs being created thanks to the expansion of this industry.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Ministers might have been too busy to see last night’s TV reports about the port of Immingham in my constituency and the opportunities that have been created there. Would the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers care to comment on how we can promote free port status for Immingham post Brexit?
Greg Clark: I am familiar with Immingham from numerous dealings with my hon. Friend. It is a very enterprising port that is already doing well, but I am happy to meet him to explore further possibilities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: One-sentence questions not exceeding 20 words, please.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The post office in my home town of Tain was closed and moved into a newsagent. There is not room to swing a cat there, although the staff are excellent. Will Her Majesty’s Government look again at the dimensions and layout of post offices as and when they are amalgamated with retail businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: I do not know the particular setting that the hon. Gentleman refers to, but I am more than happy to meet him to discuss the matter so that I can raise his concerns directly with the Post Office.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): We recently heard the disappointing news of the closure of the Michelin factory in Dundee, with the company citing cheaper imports as the reason. It will cause the loss of 845 jobs, many of which will be in my constituency. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the industrial strategy will look into ways to support traditional industries as well as new technologies?

Richard Harrington: I can assure my hon. Friend of that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just a gentle reminder of the request—the exhortation; the polite appeal—for 20 words. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What a challenge, Mr Speaker. Small and medium-sized enterprises create lots of employment throughout the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. What is the Minister doing to improve broadband so that SMEs can improve and employ even more people?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that we need to improve broadband, which is an integral part of delivering our productivity challenge. We are making sure that businesses have in place all the infrastructure they need to thrive and survive.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on recent progress towards a steel sector deal?

Richard Harrington: I have regular discussions with the steel sector and hope in future to have news that will please my hon. Friend.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It was good to see the Secretary of State in South Yorkshire, where we have a strong advanced manufacturing offer. Will he continue to work with us in future?

Greg Clark: I certainly will. It was a delight to be with the hon. Gentleman and others to celebrate the opening of Boeing’s first European manufacturing facility. It is in South Yorkshire because there is a thriving hub of advanced manufacturing there. The industrial strategy is all about reinforcing that.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome the tax on tech giants that was announced at the Budget, but will my right hon. Friend liaise with the Chancellor to ensure that it does not have a wider detrimental impact on investment in our tech start-ups?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. It is important that the tech sector maintains the progress that it has made in recent years, and I will do everything I can, with the Chancellor, to secure that.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): For 134 years, Wigan Crown post office has been the anchor of our high street and the beating heart of our community. It survived two world wars and one global financial crash; why can it not survive eight years of Tory Government?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have said repeatedly during this questions session, we are not closing post offices. If the hon. Lady has a particular problem in her constituency, I am more than happy to hear her concerns about that individual case, but we are not closing post offices. We are taking a sustainable approach to make sure that we achieve and maintain those 11,500 branches throughout the UK.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What action is the Minister taking to promote the development of small-scale modular nuclear reactors so that we can diversify the energy supply?

Richard Harrington rose—

Mr Speaker: Small-scale modular?

Richard Harrington: Nuclear reactors, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Well done!

Richard Harrington: Not that small, though. I am sure that you could do with a personal one sometimes, Mr Speaker.

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that the Government are treating the development of small modular reactors very seriously. A successful conference on the subject was held recently. I am happy to inform the House of future progress.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally, I am afraid, I call Mr Gregory Campbell.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister think that it would be a good idea to incorporate into the tourism sector deal a fantastic one-off event that occurs next year, after 68 years’ absence, when the Open championship returns to the Royal Portrush golf club?

Richard Harrington: What a tempting idea!

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to those colleagues remaining, but exciting though the session was, all good things come to an end.
Interpol Presidency Election

12.43 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Interpol presidency election tomorrow.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Interpol is currently holding its general assembly in Dubai, and a UK delegation, led by Lynne Owens, the director general of the National Crime Agency, is there at the moment. Interpol is electing a new president at the general assembly after former Interpol president and Chinese Vice-Minister of Public Security, Meng Hongwei, resigned from the position on Sunday 7 October after Chinese authorities confirmed that he had been detained and is being investigated on anti-corruption charges.

Two candidates have formally declared for the post and remain in the running as candidates. They are current acting president South Korean Kim Jong Yang and Russian vice-president—one of four vice-presidents—Alexander Prokopchuk. Members of Interpol at the general assembly will vote on the next president on Wednesday. We do not speculate on the outcome of the election, but the UK supports the candidacy of acting president Kim Jong Yang.

Sir Vince Cable: Can the Minister confirm that the British Government are doing all they can to campaign against the candidacy of Mr Prokopchuk? Will she confirm that, until recently, he was head of the central bureau in Russia and was directly responsible for the issuing of red notices, which have been abused and used against opponents of the Putin regime—such as Mr Bill Browder, the proponent of the Magnitsky sanctions? Does she not agree that if this Russian gentleman were to become head of Interpol, it would be an absolute insult to the victims of the Salisbury incident?

Will the Minister explain how the Government intend to pursue their own pursuit of red notices in Russia with that gentleman in this post? Does she not accept that, if this gentleman were to succeed in his election, this would be a massive propaganda victory for the Putin regime, just ahead of a vote in the European Union on fresh sanctions? Would it, in effect, not amount to accepting that Interpol has become a branch of the Russian mafia? I use my words carefully when I say that. Finally, does this not underline the absolute folly of undermining in any way Europol at a time when Interpol is becoming totally dysfunctional and potentially corrupted?

Harriett Baldwin: The right hon. Gentleman raises a number of points. The central point is to clarify for the House the role of the secretary general of Interpol, who, of course, is the German Jürgen Stock. He has the executive role of day-to-day responsibility for the conduct of Interpol, and the UK confirms that it has a very good working relationship with him.

The right hon. Gentleman also raises the question about the candidacy of the current vice-president of the organisation. The UK, as I said in my opening remarks, will be supporting the candidacy of the acting vice-president, Kim Yong Yang. We always seek to endorse candidates who have a history of observing standards of international behaviour.

With regard to the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes about the potential for misuse of Interpol, red notices are a very important point. He will be aware of the systems that are in place to protect individuals’ rights and, indeed, of article 3 of the Interpol constitution, which forbids any organisation to undertake any intervention or activities of a political, military, religious or racial character. Of course, there need to be safeguards, and this Government take any misuse of Interpol notices very, very seriously.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I very much welcome the statement that my hon. Friend the Minister has made today. This is really quite an extraordinary situation: to find ourselves with the possibility of not just a fox in charge of a hen coop, but the assassin in charge of the murder investigation. This is a man who has corrupted the rule of law through the use of red notices and undermined the international order by trying to subvert Interpol as an arm of his own state’s propaganda network, and now he is trying to run to lead it. This is truly extraordinary. Will she join me in saying that, should this outcome happen, we will have to look very, very seriously at our co-operation with an organisation so discredited and so corrupted?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee has very extensive experience of scrutinising these matters, and I very much welcome the scrutiny that his Committee has been giving to them. The UK has, as I have said, a very strong working relationship with the secretary general, who, of course, holds the executive role. I reassure the House that the National Crime Agency’s experience to date is that the processes adopted by Interpol are robust enough to deal with any concerns of misuse. Of course, this is something that needs to remain under scrutiny. I am sure that the Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as the Government, will continue to make sure that that scrutiny continues to take place.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent question. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) on securing it. On this day a fortnight ago, the right hon. Gentleman and I found ourselves on opposite sides of the table at the Cambridge Union in a debate about whether the special relationship with America was dead. I am glad to say that the students sided with me in saying that it was not, but today, on the subject of Interpol, the right hon. Gentleman and I are very much on the same side.

As a matter of principle, I am sure that we would all want to make clear that when an individual is put forward for a leadership role in an international body, the judgment of their fitness for office should always be based on their integrity, their expertise and their record, not on their nationality. Therefore, by itself the fact that Major General Prokopchuk is Russian should not disqualify him from this role any more than the fact that Martin Griffiths and Mark Lowcock are British should disqualify them from their role regarding Yemen. However, the fact that, as the head of Russia’s national central bureau for the last seven years, the major general has directly orchestrated Russia’s abuse of Interpol’s international arrest warrant system to target Putin’s Government’s enemies in both business and politics is in itself enough...
to disqualify him. It would be extremely concerning for the future functioning of Interpol as a credible international organisation if he were to be elected to the presidency.

The Minister says that Britain will be supporting an alternative candidate, but the question is what diplomatic efforts will she be making in the next 24 hours, particularly in respect of our European and Commonwealth counterparts, to build a majority against the election of the Russian candidate. In the unfortunate scenario that the major general is elected, will she say what that will mean for the future of Interpol, for the continued abuse of the arrest warrant system and for Britain’s continued participation in Interpol?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for a very measured set of questions. She is right that one should look at the qualification of candidates to these different organisations and make one’s judgment accordingly, rather than making a knee-jerk reaction on the basis of nationality. Let me also underline that the special relationship that the right hon. Lady mentioned in the preamble to her questions is obviously extremely strong and is not in any way affected by the matters we are discussing in the House today.

I should clarify for the House again that, as with any international organisation, other factors often need to be taken into account—for example, geographical balance among roles in the organisation. For example, one factor taken into account was the geographical breakdown of the current vice-presidents. As the right hon. Lady will know, Mr Prokopchuk has been in the role of vice-president for some time, and there is a vacancy in terms of representatives from Asia because the previous president has departed. That needs to be taken into account.

The executive responsibility of the day-to-day operation of Interpol falls to Secretary General Jürgen Stock, who is of course a German national. The presidency of Interpol has a range of important roles in terms of presiding at meetings. The previous president had wanted to make some changes to the way in which the organisation runs but was unsuccessful. The right hon. Lady is right that there are a range of different factors to take into account. I have made the UK’s position clear. Of course, between the time that the previous president went back to China and the election tomorrow, the UK has been fully engaged in consulting with our allies on this role through our diplomatic network.

**Dominic Raab** (Esher and Walton) (Con): After the Salisbury nerve agent attack and the abuse of red notices by the Kremlin, including in relation to Bill Browder, may I urge the Government to recognise that the election of a Putin-appointed police general would not only weaken the operational effectiveness of Interpol, but undermine our ability to rely on it and shred its credibility as a pillar upholding the international rule of law?

**Harriett Baldwin:** As my right hon. Friend is aware, the Russian candidate is currently a vice-president of Interpol, and the general assembly will make its decision tomorrow. I have made the UK’s position clear. My right hon. Friend should also be aware that the National

Crime Agency hosts the UK international crime bureau, which is responsible for handling any Interpol requests into the UK, and the NCA is very supportive of the overall processes of Interpol. In terms of any concerns it might have about requests received, it feels that it has the ability to refer requests to the Commission for the Control of Files, which provides independent oversight and some checks and balances of Interpol’s processes.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Mr Prokopchuk may be the candidate on the ballot paper, but let us be under no illusion that it will be President Putin who calls the shots should Mr Prokopchuk be successful at the general assembly. If Mr Prokopchuk is successful and does become the president of Interpol, does the Minister agree that it will be a slap in the face not just to this country and in particular to the people of Salisbury, but to the people of Georgia, the people of Ukraine—including eastern Ukraine and Crimea—as well as to the civil society activists, opposition politicians and journalists in Russia who have been hunted down by the Putin regime? Will she tell the House what she expects to happen, if the Russian candidate is successful, to the red notices against Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov, who were responsible for the nerve assault in Salisbury?

Although the Scottish National party holds no candle for this man and no candle for the Russian Government, may I urge the Minister to resist calls to withdraw from Interpol at the stage? Of course we have to monitor what happens if the Russian candidate is successful, but to pull out from Interpol so soon and so quickly would undermine further the rule of law that we all wish to see upheld.

**Harriett Baldwin:** The hon. Gentleman makes a range of very sensible points, but I do not think that he would want me to conflate a range of different issues from the Dispatch Box. As he knows, this particular candidate is currently a vice-president of Interpol. I have mentioned the important role of the secretary general when it comes to executive responsibility within the organisation. I have also mentioned some of the roles of the presidency and the checks and balances that exist regarding this important international organisation.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the importance of Interpol and its work. We do not believe that any possible outcome of this election will have an impact on the issues to which he rightly draws the attention of the House, but since he has raised these issues I reiterate that we continue to want the Russian Government to come clean about their role in Salisbury, to account for their use of Novichok on British soil and to declare their chemical weapons programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. I hope that he and the House will be reassured that there are a range of different ways in which we will continue to pursue those ends, while recognising the important role that Interpol can play for our police force here in the UK.

**Mr John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of the concerns expressed by a number of organisations campaigning for media freedom, such as Reporters Sans Frontières, that the Interpol wanted person alert system is being abused by countries that are
opposed to a free press, to target and silence journalists? Does she agree with these organisations that there needs to be a review of the thousands of alerts currently sitting on that system and that countries that abuse the system should be held to account? Does she also share my concern that this is hardly likely to happen under the Russian candidate for the presidency?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s extensive work in this area and thank him very much for putting those important points before the House today. As he knows, article 3 of Interpol’s constitution forbids the organisation to undertake any intervention or activity of a political nature. Any such misuse of Interpol notices is taken very, very seriously by this Government. The UK continues to take a strongly supportive stance in relation to Interpol’s efforts to ensure that systems are in place to protect human rights—indeed, the Home Office has been highly proactive in its engagement with Interpol on this matter. I appreciate the important work that my right hon. Friend mentioned. I assure him that the UK will continue to be a staunch friend of those who are on the side of human rights and media freedom around the world.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): It is clearly absurd to put into this position the representative of what has become, under Putin, a criminal enterprise that has looted Russia, impoverished its people, and locks up and murders its opponents at home and abroad. What assurances can the Minister give us about what would happen to the sharing of information, access to databases and all the other arrangements that exist between Britain and Interpol if this man were to be put in charge of the current assembly meeting?

Harriett Baldwin: As I tried to explain earlier, two of the current vice-presidents are the declared candidates for the presidency; one of them is acting president and the other is currently a vice-president. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that while the presidency of Interpol is an important role, it is none the less one that has more of a ceremonial aspect with regard to meetings of the general assembly and the executive committee. The executive work of Interpol is led by the secretary-general and his executive committee. Obviously, in an international organisation like this, it is very important to have checks and balances as well as regionally balanced representation. I am reassured by the fact that the National Crime Agency, from its experience so far with the organisation, believes that the right checks and balances are in place, but of course that will continue to be scrutinised by this House.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): My hon. Friend knows a lot about Russia—she is, if I am not mistaken, one of the few Members of this House who has a degree in the Russian language, so we know that her approach is not, per se, anti-Russian. Does she agree with the assessment of Fair Trials, the UK-based rights campaign, which says:

“It would not be appropriate for a country with a record of violations of Interpol’s rules to be given a leadership role in a key oversight institution”?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. As he rightly points out, there is a distinction to be made here. I have set out the UK Government’s position with regard to tomorrow’s election and our judgment regarding the candidate that we support. He is absolutely right that, in the Prime Minister’s words, we have absolutely no quarrel with the people of Russia. I take this opportunity at the Dispatch Box to reiterate the UK Government’s desire to see Russia behave as a responsible member of the international community and to end its illegal annexation of Crimea, to end the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine, and, indeed, to account for the reckless actions of the GRU on British soil and to rein in GRU activities. That, as my right hon. Friend rightly points out, does not mean that the British people cannot, through cultural relations and ongoing diplomatic relations, engage with the Russian Government.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What contingency plan do the Government have, in the event that this Putin stooge is elected, to work with our western democracy allies—who, after all, mainly fund Interpol—to set up an alternative democratic, transparent and non-corrupt organisation?

Harriett Baldwin: I hope that I have already set out for the House both the character of the role of the presidency and the checks and balances that exist within this international organisation. Interpol, in terms of geographical balance, the ability to query domestically any particular request that might come through Interpol processes, and the protections of article 3. I expect the matter to remain under scrutiny in this House in the foreseeable future, but I reiterate that the UK Government’s and the National Crime Agency’s view is that the safeguards I outlined earlier, and the ability to question some of the procedures, are checks and processes that we believe are working well. Of course that will be kept continuously under review.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What action has the organisation taken to challenge Russia over its recent abuse of the rules?

Harriett Baldwin: Without my right hon. Friend being more specific about the examples to which he alludes, I can only say that I think he will be aware that we are talking about two different processes. There is the one relating to Interpol, where I have outlined the way in which the National Crime Agency is able to invoke checks and balances and to ensure that article 3 is not violated. Separately, as he will also be aware, the UK has very much been leading the international efforts at the OPCW to challenge the egregious use of chemical weapons and violations of the chemical weapons convention, including the use of chemical weapons on UK soil that has been attributed to Russia. We have, as he knows, worked very closely with the OPCW to ensure that a special conference of the state parties has been held and that the state parties can now attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Syria and, if needed, elsewhere in the future.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Interpol’s reputation for the enforcement of international law is already being undermined by its silence over the disappearance in China of its former president, and it will be undermined further if its new president is someone who in Russia has been involved in also trying to undermine international law and abuse
Interpol processes. Given that the police have given evidence to the Home Affairs Committee that the Brexit process may make us more dependent on Interpol processes, databases and institutions, what is the Foreign Office doing to strengthen the Europol relationship and to look at reforms, through Interpol and through new additional processes, to strengthen the rule of international law?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure that the right hon. Lady would support the UK view, which is that the issue of the arrest of the former Chinese president is very much a matter for the Chinese state. She rightly draws attention to the importance of international law and of our rules-based international order. I assure her that in all instances the UK Government will take the opportunity in international forums to support the observance of international law and due process, and, indeed, human rights. That is very much part of what the UK stands for in these international forums. We recognise the importance of upholding the precious rules-based international order on which the safety and security of the UK has been based since the second world war.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The difficulty for many Members is that Russia keeps getting away with it at international level. It got away with it by being able to host a successful World cup, and there is frustration that it may get away with it again. Will our delegate have the opportunity to say to other countries that if this election goes the way we hope it does not, we will form a new body automatically?

Harriett Baldwin: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised the World cup, because it is a good example of where UK police and Russian police were able to work closely together to ensure that all fans from the UK who travelled to Russia were able to enjoy World cup matches, and those processes worked well. He refers to the importance of international police co-operation, for which Interpol is an important mechanism. The National Crime Agency believes that it is an effective forum for it to work with, so that the delegation at Interpol and the current conference in Dubai can reassure themselves that there is a range of checks and balances, including article 3, that means they are confident that Interpol will continue to be an important part of the UK’s relation with international policing matters.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Everyone knows that with a rising threat from organised crime internationally, we have to co-operate internationally, but evidence and the weaknesses that have been described today show that Interpol is really not up to the job. Can the Minister reassure the House that Britain’s relationship with Europol and European co-operation against international crime will be kept and strengthened? People are really worried, given the threat that Brexit poses to that co-operation.

Harriett Baldwin: I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the UK continues to believe that it is very important to co-operate internationally. Where I perhaps differ from him is that I am reassured that Interpol will continue to be an important part of the UK’s ability to co-operate internationally on police matters.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Given what happened to the previous president of Interpol, can the Minister update us on conversations she has had with China on the importance of multilateral organisations?

Harriett Baldwin: As my hon. Friend heard me say earlier, we believe that the situation surrounding the arrest of the former Interpol president is very much a matter for the Chinese state. In terms of the latter part of her question, we have the opportunity to interact with the Chinese Government on an ongoing and constant basis in a range of multilateral forums. That is an important part of the UK’s diplomatic work and includes the UK delegation to the United Nations, where we work on a range of issues as permanent members of the Security Council. It would be hard for me at the Dispatch Box to list the range of different international forums in which we are co-operating with the Chinese Government, but I assure her that it is extensive.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Minister help me? I might be becoming a bit paranoid after watching too much John le Carré on television recently, but what we see unfolding seems extraordinary. First, the president disappears in China—even his wife does not know where he is, and she says he never resigned—and almost no action is taken by the secretary-general of Interpol to find out what happened to him. Secondly, a Russian vice-president now looks likely to become president, at a time when we all know that Russia is hellbent on undermining international institutions all over the world, including democratic Governments, the European Union and everything else. Is that not the reality of the backdrop, and would it not be a disastrous development to have this man as president?

Harriett Baldwin: Without digressing into the wider universe—some of it fictional—in which the hon. Gentleman prefaced his question, I draw his attention to the UK Government’s position on both tomorrow’s election for this presidency and the checks and balances in terms of Interpol’s work, with a continuing assurance from our National Crime Agency that it regards those checks and balances and article 3 as important underpinnings that continue to have its full support in its ongoing work with Interpol.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The more I am learning about the governance of Interpol, the more worried I am becoming. Why on earth are member states that use their police for internal political repression allowed into this organisation in the first place?

Harriett Baldwin: It is a UN organisation with a very wide membership—193 states, if I remember the figure correctly—but it is also possible to be a member of Interpol without necessarily being accepted internationally as a state, through observer status. The point I will make to my hon. Friend is that organised crime does not have boundaries, so it is really important that Interpol’s coverage is wide. We would not want parts of the world to be safe havens or exempt from the ability of police forces to co-operate with each other. It is an important aspiration that Interpol’s coverage be as wide as possible.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Given the concerns that already exist about the way in which Interpol red notices work, will the Government undertake
to secure confirmation in advance from countries that people like Mr Browder will visit that they will not seek to apply any spurious or bogus red notices that might be issued through Interpol at the instigation of, for instance, the Russians?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot possibly make a sweeping statement of that nature from the Dispatch Box about all possible future examples. That would be too wide, but I think that, in terms of the use of the red notices, one can refer to the framework with which one is dealing, the reassurance given by article 3 of the constitution of Interpol and the checks and balances that I referred to.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the election of this Russian will undermine the work we are doing at the Council of Europe and will undermine the European Court of Human Rights, which the Council looks after and where the cases against Russia mount daily?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the fantastic work that my hon. Friend does as part of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe. We value that strongly. This question is tightly constrained around the topic of the Interpol presidency election. A wide number of international organisations form an important part of the rules-based international order, and it will be the UK’s position to support the working of that rules-based international order in all those organisations.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Russia has tried to abuse Interpol no fewer than seven times to arrest Bill Browder. What assurance can the Minister give and what protection can her Government offer Mr Browder and all others currently facing pursuit from the Russian state, should the Russian candidate get elected?

Harriett Baldwin: I hope that I have been able to draw the House’s attention to several safeguards. First, the presidency, while an important role, is not an executive role; that role is held by the secretary-general and the executive committee. Secondly, I have drawn attention to the protections that article 3 of Interpol’s constitution gives, and thirdly, to the checks and balances that exist when, for example, a red notice is given to the UK National Crime Agency. There is a range of different checks and balances. Of course, every country that is a member of Interpol will perhaps approach things differently, but that is the position of the UK Government.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is totally wrong for a state actor such as Russia to use Interpol in a politicised way to fulfil its own political ambitions, and we should condemn in the strongest terms any attempt by Russia to do so?

Harriett Baldwin: I have strongly condemned a range of different activities, on which the UK has been holding Russia to account, particularly with regard to chemical weapons. Specifically on the situation of Interpol, I reiterate the important protections brought about by the existence of article 3. I would also point to, within the UK, the checks and balances that exist in terms of the red notices. As I have said in response to earlier questions from Members, that is obviously something that the UK Government will continue to keep under review.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The future credibility of Interpol is absolutely essential, never more so than when it comes to investigating violations of human rights, particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, so may I ask the Minister: what kind of message would it send to the LGBT community if Mr Prokopchuk were elected as president of this organisation?

Harriett Baldwin: On what the UK Government have tried to do, I have outlined the UK Government’s position as far as this election is concerned. The hon. Gentleman opens up this question to wider issues. I highlight the importance that the UK Government place, in their discussions with countries around the world, on LGBT rights and human rights. That will form part of our diplomatic engagement.

The hon. Gentleman should pass on his appreciation to the teams and the supporters who travelled to Russia during the World cup over the summer. Work was done by a range of volunteers, but also, importantly, by the police to ensure that they all had the opportunity to enjoy a safe World cup.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): In her question, the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), drew a comparison between diplomatic work by British diplomats in Yemen and the involvement of Russia in Interpol. Will my hon. Friend make it absolutely clear that there is no moral equivalence between the UK Government and Putin’s Russia? Furthermore, will she make it clear that the election of Alexander Prokopchuk could permanently undermine the credibility of Interpol? If he is elected, will we immediately take steps to build alternative international policing responses?

Harriett Baldwin: I find myself in the slightly unusual position of perhaps slightly defending the right hon. Lady because I did not see quite the angle that my hon. Friend saw in the question she posed. However, it is important that the UK, where appropriate, seeks to have the right representation in these international organisations. It is also very important—I assure my hon. Friend of this—that the UK will always seek and campaign to have the right representatives in these international organisations. He is absolutely right that the role the UK plays will often have the support of the rules-based international order through our membership of the United Nations, Interpol or other organisations. It is important that the UK Government reiterate at this Dispatch Box that we will always seek to work with the international rules-based order and uphold the values that have kept the country safe since the second world war.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): There are shades here of what happened at FIFA, with voters being picked off one by one—this is actually scary. Given Russia’s recent violations of international law and the allegations regarding its influence via Facebook on elections around the world via fake news—we highlight that in our Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee
Rebecca Pow: Does not the Minister agree that it is completely and utterly inappropriate to have a Russian at the helm of Interpol?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and to the Committee of which she is a member for the important work and scrutiny that it is undertaking at the moment. I encourage colleagues on other Committees with some locus in relation to this urgent question to continue the important work of scrutinising what the UK Government do.

I point out to my hon. Friend what I pointed out earlier: the gentleman in question is currently a vice-president of Interpol; the presidency is not an executive role; and we have huge confidence in the ongoing work of Secretary-General Jürgen Stock—a German national—and his executive committee in terms of the daily conduct of Interpol and the execution of the organisation's strategic objectives.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Russia's attempts to discredit international organisations through its behaviour with Interpol and its consistent use of its veto to neuter the use of the International Criminal Court set a very worrying trend for the future. Will the Minister reassure me that, if this appointment is made—we hope it is not—she will work with our traditional allies to look at what we can do to strengthen the international rules-based order and ensure that it does not become so discredited that we head towards some of the disastrous situations we saw in the past when it did not exist?

Harriett Baldwin: Despite the narrowness of the defined subject of the urgent question, perhaps you will allow me, Mr Speaker, to make the wider point that the UK will commit, along with our international partners and allies, to send clear messages, where appropriate, about the consequences of Russia's malign activity. I can give the recent example of our shining a light on the reckless and irresponsible cyber activities of the Russian military intelligence unit, the GRU.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Is not it of critical importance that Interpol is able to act transparently and that it is not manipulated by the Russian Government?

Harriett Baldwin: Of course, it is very important that the National Crime Agency continues to feel confidence in terms of its co-operation with Interpol. I can report to my hon. Friend and to the House that the National Crime Agency continues to have a very good working relationship with Interpol, to value that international co-operation and to feel that the checks and balances in terms of Interpol activity, including the existence of article 3, provide important protections.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): In my youth, Interpol was a byword: it put the fear of God into criminals who wanted to operate across borders and it meant that there was no hiding place. It was known for its openness and transparency in the old days. Does my hon. Friend agree that that reputation would be thrown out of the window if this appointment went ahead and that we might lose a police force of inestimable value?

Harriett Baldwin: I point out to my hon. Friend that there are two candidates and I have made it clear at the Dispatch Box which candidate the UK prefers. It is important to continue to have the same kind of geographical balance and to make sure that an organisation that has a wide international membership continues to have a good geographical balance across the roles of the president, the vice-presidents, the secretary-general and the executive. I hope I have made clear the value that the National Crime Agency puts on this international co-operation, as well as the checks and balances that exist. We must continue to maintain scrutiny of all these things, but that international co-operation is valuable and we will continue to be a member of Interpol, despite what may be the outcome of tomorrow's election.
**Ebola Response Update**

1.30 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the current outbreak of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and how the UK Government are continuing to support the response and preparedness activities in neighbouring countries.

Miraculously, I have put on a different hat. Since the last update to the House on 10 October by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, the number of confirmed Ebola cases in this outbreak has continued to rise. As of 18 November, there were 326 confirmed cases and a further 47 probable cases, making this Ebola outbreak the biggest in the history of the DRC.

The DRC Government are leading the response with the support of the World Health Organisation. The DRC Government issued a revised response plan in late October, which projected that the outbreak would be contained and declared over by the end of January 2019. However, it is now clear that that will take several more months to achieve.

The WHO judges that ending the outbreak could take a further six months, under a best-case scenario. That reflects the very challenging operating environment in eastern DRC, which is a heavily populated area affected by insecurity. For example, last weekend an attack by armed groups on a MONUSCO base was close to where a vaccination team were staying. Thankfully, none of the Ebola responders was injured, but they were moved to Goma for a short period and vaccination activities had to be paused for a day.

The scale of the response is also challenging. In addition to the 373 confirmed and probable cases, the DRC Government, supported by WHO and other implementing partners, is trying to trace some 4,400 contacts, making this Ebola outbreak the biggest in the history of the DRC.

However, there is some encouraging news. The response is enabling faster detection of cases, laboratory diagnosis and monitoring of the spread of the disease. The WHO-led support is improving Government medical facilities and their capacity to manage patients and treat them safely. That includes vaccination of health workers, provision of personal protection equipment, and advice on safe practices for dealing with suspect and confirmed cases. Part of the response involves raising awareness of the disease within local communities and putting in place measures to prevent cross-border spread. So far, 110 people have recovered.

The UK responded quickly to support the international response as the second largest donor to the strategic response plan, as well as deploying epidemiological experts to support the WHO response on the ground. UK support has helped to improve leadership and co-ordination, surveillance, infection prevention control and preparedness measures.

In view of recent developments, we have increased our support for the response and preparedness activities in DRC and neighbouring countries. Our funding will support a range of activities including surveillance, vaccinations, infection prevention and control, community engagement and safe and dignified burials.

In addition, the UK is supporting neighbouring countries to prepare to tackle the disease should it spread, by funding key UN posts in Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan to ensure they are as prepared as possible and applying the lessons of previous experience in tackling Ebola. An experimental vaccine, the development of which was supported by UK aid following the west Africa outbreak, is being given to frontline health workers and contacts of confirmed cases. In the DRC, over 31,000 people, more than 10,000 of whom are health workers, have already been vaccinated during this outbreak. The UK is also supporting training in preparation for clinical trials of several of the new therapeutic drugs for Ebola.

The UK Government are also drawing on all available scientific data about the latest outbreak. We will continue to liaise closely with WHO and others to ensure that the available scientific evidence is reflected in scenario planning. An international Ebola preparedness and co-ordination meeting is due to take place in Goma shortly, which will be attended by Ministers from the DRC and Uganda, to discuss cross-border co-ordination.

So far, the UK has contributed £25 million to the Ebola response. This is supporting WHO to work on screening, surveillance and preparedness, not only in the DRC but in neighbouring countries. Of this, some £20 million is from the crisis reserve of the Department for International Development, and £5 million is from the country budget for Uganda. When I visited Uganda last month, I saw how UK aid is helping the Uganda national taskforce to be ready to deal with Ebola, as needed.

It is clear that the response will require a sustained effort over time and additional resources. The UK Government stand ready to provide additional assistance. Therefore, we have agreed a further £20 million from our central crisis reserve in 2018-19, to support Ebola responses in the affected region.

I am sure that my colleagues in the House will recognise the risk that Ebola responders face. The DRC Government have asked donors not to publicise figures for specific activities, to avoid putting implementing partners at risk from criminal elements. I hope that the House and members of the press will respect the need for discretion about this issue. Public Health England assesses the risk to the UK of this outbreak as negligible to very low. It will continue to monitor and assess the outbreak closely. Should that risk change, the UK Government remain at full readiness to respond, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.37 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): First, I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of her statement. I share the Government’s deep concern about the outbreak of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and I am pleased to hear that £25 million of UK aid has been given to the response. We hope that it goes some way to containing this deadly outbreak.

In addition, supporting neighbouring countries to prepare to tackle the disease is fundamental and welcome. In 2014, we learned that the way what happened when action is not taken fast enough to halt the cruel and deadly Ebola virus. We all remember with great sadness how too many people tragically lost their lives in west
Africa, and none of us will ever forget the fear and chaos that the virus wreaked on the affected communities, and indeed right across the globe. I am sure we all agree that we must act now to avoid a repeat of those horrific scenes, and help the DRC to contain this outbreak.

With the World Health Organisation reporting that 213 people have died since 1 August in the DRC, and the humanitarian agency Médecins sans Frontières confirming 366 cases, let us be sure that DFID steps up and ensures that the UK plays a crucial leadership role alongside the international community in responding to this outbreak, just as we did in Sierra Leone four years ago.

However, while emergency humanitarian response is an integral part of DFID’s work, I am sure the Minister agrees that prevention is better than emergency response. While we send aid to DRC, we cannot and must not turn our backs on providing the long-term support that will ensure countries across the global south have appropriate health systems set up in the first place.

It is deeply disappointing, therefore, that the Minister’s Department dropped health spending from 18% of DFID spend in 2014, to 12% in 2017. Meanwhile, spending on banking and financial services has been on the increase, as the Department appears to lose sight of its core work and instead increases spending on promoting private companies to expand their profits.

Just this year, the aid watchdog, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, told DFID it really needs to improve its work on strengthening health systems. May I ask the Minister, therefore, if she feels that her Department has learned the lessons of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and recognises that supporting countries to build strong, well-managed public services is the only way to ensure that we will not see these outbreaks again in the future?

Harriett Baldwin: I will come on to the lessons learnt since the outbreak in Sierra Leone in a moment. However, I am sure that I cannot possibly have heard from the Opposition Front Bench a statement to the effect that having a strong private sector is somehow in conflict with having the revenues needed to provide strong health systems around the world. I hope that that is not the considered position of those on the Labour Front Bench. While spending on strengthening health systems around the world, particularly in some of the poorest and most fragile affected countries, it is important that we in the UK recognise the important role of growth and job creation in the ability of those countries to generate their own tax revenues so that they can continue to strengthen their own health systems. We think that that is the most important way to approach worldwide development.

I digress from the topic at hand. The hon. Lady mentions the outbreak in west Africa. I draw the attention of the House to progress and lessons that have been learned since that outbreak. First, the importance of reacting quickly has been taken into account, both in the first outbreak in the DRC earlier this year, which I am glad to say has been brought under control, and in this outbreak. Importantly, the UK has ensured that the WHO has the resources it needs as soon as it needs them, because this is a clear case of where a quick reaction will save lives.

One major milestone that has occurred since the outbreak in west Africa is that the world has developed an experimental vaccine, which was deployed for the first time this year in the DRC. It proved to be effective in the first outbreak. As I said, 31,000 people have been given the experimental vaccine so far in this outbreak. One real challenge, however, is that this outbreak is in a conflict-affected area. That makes it very difficult to trace contacts and, as I mentioned, 4,400 contacts need to be traced daily. It also makes it very difficult to deliver the vaccine. The vaccine requires trained medical professionals to deliver it. It also requires a secure cold chain. The fact that this is a conflict-affected area is therefore significantly hampering the ability of the international community to do what it needs to do.

The third lesson learned from the outbreak in west Africa is that the WHO strengthened its own processes and has worked with a range of different countries to strengthen their health processes. Ensuring resilience in neighbouring countries is very much a part of the response at the moment—this outbreak is not far from the Ugandan border, just some 20 miles inside the DRC. Strengthening the reaction and response at borders is a lesson that has been learned.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is some interest in this matter. We appreciate both the Minister’s statement and her desire to provide comprehensive replies, but I remind the House that there are several hours of debate upcoming on the Finance Bill and before we even get to that we have a further statement to follow. I want the next statement to start at two o’clock, so we need short questions and very short answers.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The Minister mentions Uganda, Rwanda and South Sudan. It is a good idea to be investing in those countries, but has the Minister also considered investing in Burundi, particularly given the economic and political instability, and the poor health system in that neighbouring country?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to think about the implications further south. This outbreak is happening closer to the Ugandan border, but he is absolutely right that in due course it may be important to consider the impact on Burundi. He will be aware of the current very difficult situation for international non-governmental organisations in Burundi. Some NGOs have been asked to leave the country and the UK remains concerned about its ability to work with them there. However, I take on board his point that, should there be further movement to the south, it will be very important to ensure preparedness extends to Burundi.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement on what is a particularly unpleasant and serious illness. I was grateful to hear her update on the resources that are being provided to deal with the DRC’s largest ever outbreak of one of the most deadly strains of Ebola. I was also grateful to hear that increased support is being provided.
Can the Minister advise me on how many people are working in the region as part of the UK public health and support team? What measures are in place to protect their safety in what is effectively a war zone? It is estimated that more than 100 armed groups are active in the territory of North Kivu. A number of attacks in this province where Ebola has been witnessed are seriously hampering the Ebola outbreak response activities. What is being done to address such issues around instability, which are affecting the efforts to control the outbreak?

Finally, while I welcome the update on the numbers of people who have been provided with the experimental vaccine, may we have an update on the clinical trials of several new therapeutic drugs for Ebola that the Minister's Department is supporting training for?

Harriett Baldwin: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments. I want to reassure the House that from the very get-go—both with this outbreak and in the earlier outbreak—the UK made it clear that we will provide resources. What we really need is for the WHO and the DRC Government to co-operate on delivering them. He will be aware that some very brave people from Public Health England were able to fly out to the first outbreak, when the experimental vaccine was deployed for the first time. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to their amazing bravery, and indeed to the bravery of all health workers involved in this particular deployment.

I would also like to underline the other ways in which the UK is providing support. Financial support is obviously important, as was the initial support from Public Health England in terms of the cold chain. We helped to develop the vaccine and we also helped in terms of widespread support to the health systems in poorer countries, including the DRC, where I was able to see some of the work that we have helped to support. We also support the MONUSCO peacekeeping operation, so there is a wide variety of ways in which the UK helps.

On the hon. Gentleman's specific point about other experimental vaccines that we may be investigating, I will write to him.

Mr Speaker: We will now have an exemplification of brevity—I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Victims are at their most infectious when they are dead. A key intervention in Sierra Leone was burial teams; are they being deployed in the Congo?

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend is always a model of brevity. I can assure him that in my perhaps too verbose statement, I drew attention to the fact that we are supporting safe burial practices.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister recognise the importance of the work in this field of Professor Tom Solomon of the University of Liverpool, and of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine? Will she continue to support international funding so that their efforts, as part of a comprehensive approach to deal with this disease, are supported?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to the very important role that these key partnerships play around the world in strengthening health systems. She mentioned Liverpool which, as the House will know, does amazing work in this area and on neglected tropical diseases. When I was in Uganda, I saw the incredibly strong partnership between the Uganda Virus Research Institute and the University of London through its London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Those incredibly important partnerships are a win-win for the developing world, and a win for the UK.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I declare an interest as a trustee of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. Has my hon. Friend found that the amazing expertise gained by her Department as a result of that tragic situation in 2014 has been retained and enhanced in the meantime, or are we having to learn things again?

Harriett Baldwin: I mentioned some of the ways in which knowledge of dealing with these outbreaks has been acquired and improved on as a result of the outbreak in west Africa. Much of the expertise in Public Health England was drawn on very early in the previous outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I reiterate that the response is running into challenges not because of a lack of expertise, a lack of vaccine or a lack of dedicated personnel willing to deliver it, but because of the conflict on the ground. People are attacking peacekeepers in the area. Therefore, we call on all participants to eschew violence and allow health workers to do the job that they need to do, because that is the real threat in this outbreak.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): According to Médecins Sans Frontières, the delay in recognising the latest outbreak is in part due to a strike by health workers in the area over non-payment of salaries. Will the Minister elaborate on what her Department is doing to support the functioning of the health service in that country?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to the amazing work done by Médecins Sans Frontières, which is part of the delivery mechanism for the response. We have been very pleased with the co-operation that we have had from the DRC Government and their health system but, as the hon. Lady will know, that country is enormous. It is extremely heavily populated and conflict is being experienced in this particular area. Those factors, rather than a willingness of spirit or the desire to help, are the particular challenges in this outbreak.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): To what extent does my hon. Friend think that the security situation is hampering efforts to treat people in the region, and what are the solutions?

Harriett Baldwin: I underline that that is the fundamental challenge in the outbreak, because it has made it very difficult to trace contacts—I mentioned that over 4,000 people who are contacts of people who have tested positive for the disease need to be traced every day—and it is making it really difficult for health workers to do their job. The fact that MONUSCO has come under attack in the area underlines the very fragile security situation, which is causing untold harm to the response.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister mentioned the fragile security situation, and we know that the US Government will not allow their employees to go near the epicentre, because it is unstable. What
assessment have the UK Government made of the security of UK employees there and of the circumstances in which they will be able to continue to work?

Harriett Baldwin: I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the remark that I made towards the end of my statement, which was that, with respect to the House, we do not feel that it is helpful to the security of the individuals involved to comment on any specifics about the people who are currently working in that region on behalf of the UK Government.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I thank the Minister for the decisiveness of her Department’s response. Is she satisfied that all precautions are being taken to ensure that the disease is contained and not inadvertently exported to nearby countries or, indeed, even further afield by plane?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. We constantly ask ourselves that question and we constantly ask our interlocutors from the relevant neighbouring countries whether there is anything else that should be done or that we can do to help. For example, when I was in Uganda, I was able to ask its Prime Minister whether the country would be able to approve the use of the experimental vaccine through their procedures as quickly as possible. I am glad to report to the House that, following that intervention, it has now been approved for use within Uganda.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the overall tone of the Minister’s statement. We previously saw with Operation Gritrock how our military, in an unarmed capacity—providing logistics and medical support—could make a real difference to fighting Ebola. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the Ministry of Defence about how some of those capabilities could be used, given the situation on the ground?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the amazing work that UK forces did in Sierra Leone—words fail me in describing the amazing bravery that they showed in dealing with that outbreak. This particular example is within the boundaries of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is working with the forces that it believes are appropriate for that area. It is probably worth my saying on record that were the Government of the DRC to want to explore that approach with our Ministry of Defence, we would obviously be very happy to have that conversation.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Given that it might take up to six months to contain the outbreak, what extra resource is being deployed by other major EU countries? Does that match up to the UK’s response?

Harriett Baldwin: I think I said that that was the best possible scenario. I reassure my hon. Friend that while the UK is the second largest contributor to funding the response so far, the World Health Organisation’s plan is fully funded, and other countries have stepped up to the plate to fund it. The issue is not a lack of funding or a lack of willingness from the international community to help out, and nor is it a lack of co-operation from the DRC Government in terms of the way in which the outbreak is continuing to grow. The issue is particularly the fact that this is a conflict-affected area, and that is hampering health professionals’ ability to do important work.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is the size of the geographic area in which the 326 confirmed cases have been identified?

Harriett Baldwin: As my hon. Friend will know, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the largest countries in Africa. Physically, it can sometimes be difficult to travel on the roads, and communications can be more challenging than they would be if such an outbreak happened here in the UK. The current outbreak is in the area of Beni—the previous outbreak happened in a completely different part of the DRC—which is 20 miles from the Ugandan border. Physically, the area is quite large and people also move, which is why it is important to trace the contacts that people have had, because those contacts can move easily across the country and across borders.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm that the actions of her Department are not only keeping people in the affected area safe but helping to keep UK citizens safe?

Harriett Baldwin: I can absolutely confirm that. I mentioned that Public Health England believes that the risk to the UK population is currently low, but obviously people travel around the world, and in this interconnected world, I strongly believe that a healthier world means a healthier UK.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The Minister has said repeatedly that the conflict has prevented efforts to contain the outbreak. What steps can the UK Government take to help bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion?

Harriett Baldwin: As my hon. Friend will know, there are many sources of conflict in the DRC. The UK, as a leading member of the UN, is a significant funder of the UN peacekeeping operation, MONUSCO, which has been there for a long time. Obviously, the UK supports it proportionately alongside our other obligations at the UN.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): World Health Organisation officials had to leave following an attack on a hotel in the Congo. Does the Minister anticipate more UN peacekeepers being in place to help officials stay in post?

Harriett Baldwin: I would like to put on the record my appreciation for the work of the MONUSCO peacekeepers in this very dangerous part of the world. Far too many of them have been victims of violence while doing their job. Given how prone this part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is to violence and conflict, it is important that the relevant Government authorities work with MONUSCO to take whatever steps they believe necessary to protect those peacekeepers and ensure that the appropriate forces are there.
**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Terrorists and refugees are extremely mobile. How adequate are the plans the Minister has announced for neighbouring countries to meet that challenge?

**Harriett Baldwin**: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the risk of this outbreak being contagious across borders, given how close it is to the Ugandan border. The WHO and others are working with neighbouring countries to make sure that people are screened at the border, that there is a sufficient supply of vaccines and, as I mentioned earlier, that vaccines are approved for use within countries. We are taking all the steps we can, but what makes this outbreak so challenging is, as he rightly says, the prevalence of violent individuals disrupting the work of the health workers and peacekeepers.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): With the outbreak predicted not to be under control for another six months, can my hon. Friend please assure us that everything is being done to protect our vital and much-valued health workers? Without them, we cannot deliver the programme, and with them, the consequences could extend far beyond the Congo. Will she join me in thanking these very brave workers?

**Harriett Baldwin**: My hon. Friend makes my point incredibly eloquently. I mentioned that 31,000 health workers, I think, had received the experimental vaccine so far. Think about how brave they have to be to receive an experimental Ebola vaccine; I do not like getting my flu jab. I therefore want to take this opportunity to draw the House’s attention to those strong words of appreciation for the brave work of both the peacekeepers and the health workers.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): As the Minister has just made clear, the outbreak is less than 20 miles from the Ugandan border, which is incredibly worrying. What practical help and support are the Government giving to the Ugandan Government to prevent what would be a major crisis should this cross the border into Uganda?

**Harriett Baldwin**: I had the great pleasure of visiting Uganda and was thoroughly impressed by the work of the Uganda Virus Research Institute and the reassurances I got from across the Ugandan system about its increased preparedness for the risk of Ebola crossing the border. People there had, for example, made sure the experimental vaccine was approved by the appropriate Ugandan authorities.

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**Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation**

2.5 pm

**The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries** (Margot James): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation.

The UK has a proud history of supporting the use of open data. Indeed, there has been a huge programme of work in recent years to make sure we are promoting the open and transparent use of data. The Government are in a privileged position, as we collect a vast quantity of high-quality data while delivering public services. As the UK moves rapidly towards a data-driven economy, we have an opportunity to improve decision making in many areas. The Government have already published over 44,000 datasets. Indeed, I pay tribute to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), who was an early pioneer of open data while a Minister in the Cabinet Office.

This unprecedented openness has created many benefits. First, it has made the Government more accountable and transparent. Secondly, it can improve the effectiveness of public services. Thirdly, it has created the potential for new businesses to thrive. By making our data available to the public, we have been able to fuel businesses and applications that make life better and easier, and all this has paid dividends. We are now ranked joint first in the world on the open data barometer—an achievement of which we can be justly proud.

While open data is something we must aspire to, we also need to use it in a safe and ethical manner. The rise of artificial intelligence-driven products and services has posed new questions that will impact us all. What are the ethical implications of using technology to determine someone’s likelihood of reoffending? Is it right to use a programme powered by AI to make hiring decisions? Can it ever be right to have an algorithm influence who should be saved in a car crash? These are no longer questions for science fiction but real questions that require clear and definitive answers, where possible, from policy makers.

That is why we have recently established the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation—ethics and innovation are not mutually exclusive, as strong ethics can be a driver of innovation. It is our intention that the centre becomes a world-class advisory body to make sure that data and AI deliver the best possible outcomes for society, in support of their ethical and innovative use. Following a consultation over the summer on the activities and work of the new centre, we are pleased to publish our response today.

This is the first body of its kind to be established anywhere in the world and represents a landmark moment for data ethics in the UK and internationally. Throughout the consultation, respondents recognised the urgent need for the centre, and there was widespread support for its objectives: to advise the Government on the necessary policy and regulatory action and to empower industry through the development of best practice. In turn, we can build public trust in data-driven technologies and make the most of the opportunities they present for society.

We have announced that Roger Taylor will chair the board. Roger has a background in consumer protection, founded Dr Foster, a healthcare data company, and is a passionate advocate for using data to improve lives.
I know that he will do an excellent job. We have today announced the board members who will support Roger in this essential work. The board will include Lord Winston, a world-renowned expert in fertility and genetics, Kriti Sharma, vice president of AI at Sage and a leading global voice on data ethics, and Dame Patricia Hodgson, who was chair of Ofcom and brings a wealth of experience of regulatory affairs. The board will bring together some of our greatest minds and their immense and varied expertise to tackle these important issues.

Data is the fuel of any digital economy, and trust in that data is fundamental. As a nation, we have always been pioneers and advocates for transparency and freedom, and we will keep applying those values as we examine how we can make the most of data that is multiplying in scale and sophistication. The great challenge of the digital age is to ensure that data is used safely, ethically and, when possible, transparently. If we do that, we can help to power new technologies that will make life better and solve issues that are currently of grave concern. This truly is within our grasp, and if we work together, we can make it happen. I commend my statement to the House.

2.10 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): This Government tend to have ambitious plans for us to be an also-ran in the data age. We have an infrastructure that is hopelessly out of date, an education system that most teachers think is not fit for the future and a voluntary approach to regulation that will not ensure that the online world is a world of trust or a safe space for our children.

We welcome the Minister’s statement, and I thank her for advance sight of it. I also thank her for her words of praise for my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the shadow Secretary of State, who was indeed a pioneer of open data and the Open Data Institute and the Power of Information Task Force. However, if the new centre is to be an establishment that simply writes voluntary codes and publishes best practice, it will not stop the online hate speech, the data breaches, or the risk of new algorithms coding old injustices into new injustices and inequalities. The centre joins 12 other regulators and advisory bodies with some oversight of the internet, so we now have 13 different regulators and advisers, and this one lacks any statutory basis for either its independence or its focus.

As a test case, will the Minister tell us whether the centre will advise her on the Google DeepMind deal, whereby British health data and its control were transferred to California despite all the assurances that were given to the Government and the public at the time? Will she tell us what specific guidance she is seeking on algorithmic unfairness, given that she voted down the amendments that we had proposed to create a legislative basis in the Data Protection Act 2018? Will she tell us what advice she is seeking on reforming the competition regulation regime, given that more companies, like Amazon, are using data to create monopolistic practices in this country? Finally, will she tell us what steps she will take to ensure that the centre builds on our proposal for a digital rights Bill in a new clause earlier this year?

We are not living through an era of change; we are now living through a change of era, and it is time that the Government rose to the challenge.

Margot James: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. First, I should make it clear that the centre is not a new regulator. It will be an advisory body, which, for its first year or so, will be in the business of advising the Government and leading public debate on serious ethical issues associated with artificial intelligence. However, I can give a positive response to his question about its independence. It will become independent, and it will be placed on a statutory footing as soon as parliamentary time is available for us to introduce the necessary legislation. We fully intend this body to be totally independent of the Government in due course. Only on that basis, I believe, will it become the world-leading authority on data ethics and innovation that we want it to be in the future.

The right hon. Gentleman asks what the centre will do about online hate speech and other well-known online harms, which my Department and, indeed, the whole Government take extremely seriously. Earlier this year, we published a response to the Green Paper on internet safety, in which we stated that we were working on a White Paper that would explore various options, including legislation and statutory regulation to hold internet companies, particularly social media platforms, to account, and that we intended to produce legislation when parliamentary time permitted. We regard that area as separate from the ethical issues on which the new centre will advise public debate and the Government.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions data protection. As he knows, that is regulated by the Information Commissioner, who has been involved in the development of the centre. He also mentions competition and the concentration of huge amounts of market power in the hands of a few companies. I am sure that many Members on both sides of the House share that concern, but it is very much a matter for the Competition and Markets Authority rather than for the new centre.

The right hon. Gentleman asks whether the centre will advise on Google’s decision to move parts of the healthcare practice of DeepMind to its Californian headquarters. As DeepMind and Google are private corporations, it is not up to the Government to pass comment on how they manage their affairs, but it is, of course, up to the new centre to opine on the practices and code of corporate governance of companies with which public services and Government contracts might work in the future. So there is a connection for the centre, albeit a rather tenuous one.

Sir Peter Bottomley ( Worthing West) (Con): I hope that the centre will work in collaboration with the Open Data Institute, founded by Sir Nigel Shadbolt and Sir Tim Berners-Lee. Work on open data can make a significant difference both to people with new industries and to us in the House. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, of which I am a patron, can use open data in a way that makes the Government start to change its approach to residential leasehold. I am sure that we can use information of this kind to make our job better, and to make a better economy.

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for his suggestions. The Open Data Institute is just the sort of organisation that the new centre will work with and consult.
Mr Speaker: Order. We shall need to move on by 2.30 pm. I am sure that colleagues will factor that into their contributions.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her statement, although this data seems to be under particular protection. I did not receive an advance copy, although I am sure that that was an oversight on the part of her Department.

The Scottish National party welcomes the announcement of the establishment of the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation. In the age of big data and tech firm power, it is vital for users to be confident that their data is being used in a safe and ethical manner. It is excellent—I hope I am right about this—to see a gender balance on the board, along with racial diversity. I hope that we may see appointments that ensure that LGBTI people and people with disabilities are properly represented and reflected.

I also hope that the Minister will do her best to ensure that the board makes every effort to bridge the gender data gap. I am sure that she is well aware of “Invisible Women”, a recent book by Caroline Criado-Perez. She may also be aware of the comments made by Mayra Buvinic, a United Nations Foundation senior fellow who is working on Data2X, an initiative aimed at closing the gender data gap. She has said: “The dearth of data makes it difficult to set policies and gauge progress, preventing governments and organizations from taking measurable steps to empower women and improve lives.” I am sure the Minister agrees that if our Governments are to design the right policies, we must ensure that we collect data on all parts of our society; otherwise, how can we track progress and evaluate developments? Will the Minister discuss those matters with the board and report back on progress? Will she also explain how the centre will work with the devolved nations and Governments on these issues?

There have been reports this week that airline booking algorithms are identifying families with the same surname who are travelling together on the same flight and then deliberately seating them in different parts of the aircraft, with the aim of encouraging them to pay extra to sit together. Does the Minister agree that that is an example of practices that constitute an unethical use of data and target poorer families, and will she confirm that it is exactly such practices that the centre will examine? Perhaps that is a starter for 10.

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and apologise that she did not have advance sight of the statement. I agree with many of her points. It is essential that users can have confidence about what is done with their data. That was one of the driving forces behind the introduction of the new data protection legislation earlier in the year. I am glad that she has noted the better diversity on the board of the new institute; in my view that is vital for the very reasons she sets out. It is extremely important that gender, LGBTI and other groups are well represented during the decision-making processes on how data are used as well as on the board of the new body. I will certainly discuss those matters with the new board, which I meet for the first time at its meeting on Monday next week.

Yes, we must continue our discussions with devolved Administrations, and I have already condemned in the strongest possible terms the practices of some airline companies on which she updated the House just now; that is outrageous. These are questions of corporate governance as well as the use of AI. One of the reasons we have set the centre up is to make sure that AI is a force for public good, rather than manipulation in such a cynical attempt at profiteering.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the statement. The Select Committee on Education is conducting an inquiry into the impact of the fourth industrial revolution and AI on skills, education and our economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that such issues are often best tackled at the EU level, and that this is precisely the wrong time for leaving the EU?

Margot James: I know my hon. Friend. Friend and his Select Committee are looking into these matters and I look forward to engaging with him on them. I encourage Roger Taylor and his team to do so as well. My hon. Friend is right. A recent NESTA report looking forward at the workforce of 2030 found that 20% of our current workforce are in occupations that are likely to be subject to automation and 10% are in occupations that are likely to expand, so this is an important issue and is right at the top of our agenda.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The scandals of Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ show just how far behind Governments are in tackling data ethics and the manipulation of data. Does the Minister agree that such issues are often best tackled at EU level, and that this is precisely the wrong time for the Government to walk away from the EU if we are serious about addressing these problems?

Margot James: The matters to which the right hon. Gentleman refers were recently the subject, and continue to be the subject, of an Information Commissioner’s Office inquiry. I am confident that the ICO has the necessary resources and expertise to undertake these inquiries. Leaving the EU does not mean that we will be abandoning our data protection standards. We fully expect to maintain them and develop them further over time.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Will the centre have the scope to look at AI and data usage in political campaigning and quasi-political campaigning?

Margot James: The inquiry I referred to in the previous answer has been reported on by the Information Commissioner, and she is setting forth a code of practice for political parties to sign up to on their use of data and how data are processed.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A dating service that optimises short-term relationships to ensure repeat business. A taxi service that charges people more when their phone battery is low. A recruitment service that prioritises men for higher paid vacancies. I welcome the new centre but, with respect, those examples do not require ethical investigation; they require regulation and enforcement. When will we get that?
Margot James: In my answer to the shadow Minister, I set out that the Government are working on a White Paper that will be the precursor to various proposals and options for regulatory and legal reinforcement. Some of the examples the hon. Lady gives may well be the subject of that future legislation.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): This area presents huge challenges for society in the future, but also real opportunities, particularly in highly skilled and well-paid jobs. How will the new centre assist in taking forward the AI sector deal, which is potentially of huge benefit across the country?

Margot James: This centre will play its part, but I also draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the AI Council—recently launched, and chaired by Tabitha Goldstaub, founder of CognitionX—which is charged with taking forward the AI sector deal so we have an industry that lives up to its potential.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I too welcome the new centre, but will it be accountable to the Government, or perhaps to Parliament through the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee? Will the Minister also tell us a little more about its relationship with the ICO and run the answer to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) on DeepMind, because to suggest that because these are private companies there is no role for Government is, frankly, a complete abrogation of responsibility?

Mr Speaker: There were three inquiries there, but just one aggregated response is required.

Margot James: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for giving me the opportunity to clarify the last point he raised. Obviously private companies are subject to law and regulation. They are subject to the current laws and regulations on corporate governance, which have been strengthened by this Government in the last 18 months. I did not see that as a prime issue for the new centre, but corporations are of course subject to rules on corporate governance and so forth.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This sounds like a good idea, but we used to have a policy of reducing the number of quangos, so which quango is the Minister getting rid of to establish this new one?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful question. This is being done in response to a new and growing need which perhaps was not anticipated when we established the policy to reduce the overall number of advisory bodies to the Government.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I was delighted to welcome Google to my constituency last Friday, when it delivered internet safety training and training on the appropriate use of data at Boothroyd Primary Academy. What specific ethical provisions will the board take into account in considering the impact of new technology on children?

Margot James: The impact of new technology on children is being examined by various other organisations. For example, the chief medical officer has been instructed by the Department of Health and Social Care to examine that matter, and the Children’s Commissioner is also looking into it. It is a vital subject, which our White Paper will also address.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I welcome the establishment of this centre here in the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital to ensure that the public have confidence in how their data are being used online, particularly with regard to algorithms for AI and deep machine learning?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which goes to the heart of what we expect the new centre to be examining and advising on. She raises crucial questions, which are definitely within the remit of the new centre.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): As Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, I can confirm that it warmly welcomes the establishment of the centre. One of the issues the Government response to the consultation did not really cover was whether the centre’s remit will include the ability to advise on the need for clearer guidelines on the sharing of public sector data, so that the enormous datasets within the NHS and other public services can be shared for the public benefit while also maintaining trust.

Margot James: I thank the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee for his question, particularly as it has reminded me of something I overlooked in my answer to the previous one. It is absolutely essential that public trust is earned and reinforced, because surveys that I have seen indicate that the public have something of a crisis of trust in the way in which personal data is currently being analysed—

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): And shared.

Margot James: And shared, exactly. This is going to be a vital question for the new centre, but it also comes under the regulatory purview of the Information Commissioner.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Can my hon. Friend assure me that rural communities will have a voice at the centre, especially given the role that AI will play in driving up productivity for farms as we take back control of our agricultural policy when we leave the EU?

Margot James: I certainly think that rural areas have a key role to play and a voice that must be listened to as we develop policy in this area. If you will allow me, Mr Speaker, I also want to emphasise the fact that rural areas need better connectivity. Farms need to be able to connect to the coming 5G networks, so that they are able to take advantage of the internet of things and all the other positive benefits that AI will allow.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister and colleagues. I think that there is a lurking point of order, and if the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) can overcome his natural shyness and leap to his feet, we will hear it.
2.31 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am afraid that leaping to my feet is a thing of the past. I am sure that you are aware of the recent European Court of Justice ruling on the future of the UK energy capacity market, and of the problems that this may cause for energy providers. I am aware that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has made an unsatisfactory and possibly misleading written statement on this matter. Have you received any indication that he will be making an oral statement to the House to enable hon. Members to ask him how he intends to respond to the ruling and how the capacity market might be reformed in order to comply with it?

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. The answer is twofold. First, I have received no indication that the Secretary of State or any other Minister in the Department intends to make an oral statement on the matter. Secondly, if the hon. Gentleman is dissatisfied, as he has indicated he is, there are avenues open to him to try to secure attention to the issue in the Chamber. As an experienced and versatile Member of this House, he will know what those avenues are. I suppose I should add, in parenthesis, in respect of his dissatisfaction, that every Member is responsible for the accuracy and veracity of what he or she says in the Chamber, and that if the Minister judges that an error has been made, it is incumbent on the Minister to correct the record. I feel sure that the hon. Gentleman, who is nothing if not a persistent scrutineer of the Executive, will keep his beady eye on this matter.

2.33 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about standardised requirements for electric vehicle charge points; and for connected purposes.

I am delighted to see my neighbour, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), sitting in his place listening to this, because I bought an excellent Mitsubishi plug-in hybrid electric vehicle—lovingly know as a PHEV—from Fownhope Mitsubishi in Hereford as part of my personal commitment to a better environment and a more practical and cleaner way of travelling. However, we need to do much more to encourage the general population to invest in electric vehicles, whether fully electric or hybrid. There are some admirable policies, such as the zero rate of car tax, and some local authorities implement free parking for electric vehicles while charging, but there remain serious practical impediments to running an electric car.

The main problem is the charging points. Our goal must be for every car to be able to recharge at every charging point. If we can achieve this, we will allow more people to switch to electric vehicles. The first problem with the charging points is that there are various different connectors to attach an electric vehicle to the charging points. The two main connectors are the type 1 five-pin connector and the type 2 seven-pin connector. The combined charging system used in the rest of Europe is not currently in widespread use in the UK.

Charging points are often tethered, which means they already have cables attached to them, and that is great if someone does not have the right sort of cable, but it is no use if they have the wrong sort of card to pay with. Even when charging points are untethered, car owners have to go to great lengths and significant expense to be able to charge their car publicly. Herefordshire Council, for example, has implemented a policy of free parking for electric vehicle users while they are charging their cars. This is an excellent idea, but in order to use the charge points, people must first purchase a £400 connector lead. Many electric vehicles come fitted only with a three-pin plug for home charging, and not with the five-pin or seven-pin versions for public charging. This only adds to the confusion.

I believe it would be sensible to follow the approach that computer manufacturers took some time ago, and to create a universal standard for connectors to electric vehicles. Mobile phones, cameras and all manner of computer accessories have individualised ports on the devices themselves, but they all connect to a USB port at the power end. We should apply this to electric vehicles and create a universal standard for car chargers. Car manufacturers should conform to industry standards regarding the power-side connector not just in the UK but throughout Europe. This would mean that all cars would be able to connect to all charging points.
The power to create uniformity has already been enacted into law in the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act 2018, which states:

“Regulations may impose requirements on operators of public charging or refuelling points...in connection with the components of public charging or refuelling points that provide the means by which vehicles connect to such points”.

I believe that this power must now be used by the Secretary of State to create uniformity among charging points, and so make the lives of electric vehicle users easier. I hope that my Bill will form the basis of an amendment to the Act to ensure the creation of an industry standard, not merely to permit it.

The second problem with charging points is the disparate and patchy network available across the country. Each charging point is owned by a particular company, and each requires a particular card or key fob to operate it. This may be linked to a membership with a monthly or annual fee. Electric vehicle users in the UK are currently disadvantaged compared with our European neighbours due to our lack of an interoperable payment system for EV charging. EV drivers in the Netherlands, for example, are able to charge their cars using a common payment card system. I believe that we could make the current British model more effective and efficient by introducing a similar scheme here.

In some parts of the country, EV drivers who wish to make any significant journey may need up to three different charging cables and three different charging company memberships just to get to the other end of their trip. Of course, they cannot just go halfway; once they have a flat battery, it’s all over! An obvious solution, with the advent of contactless and mobile payment technology, is to ensure that each charging point has a pay-as-you-go option that does not require a membership or key fob. This would ensure that users who frequently use a certain charging point could still take advantage of the preferential rates that membership might bring, while users who wished to use the service as a one-off would be able to do so.

The goal is not to nationalise our network of charge points but simply to ensure that the free market is working for consumers. That is why the Government must use my Bill to force the implementation of pay as you go. The Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulations 2017 state:

“An infrastructure operator must provide to any person ad-hoc access to—
(a) all recharging points deployed after 17th November 2017; and
(b) all recharging points deployed on or before 17th November 2017, no later than 18th November 2018.”

As the House can see, this Bill is extremely timely as it falls just two days after the point at which every charging point in the country should theoretically provide ad hoc access to all users.

The Government have stated that they will ban the sale of non-electric cars from 2040. Existing incentives to drive electric vehicles, such as the congestion charge exemption, have shown that electric vehicle use is due to rise. If we are truly to be a nation of electric vehicle users, we must provide the appropriate infrastructure for their use. Car drivers must not and will not be forced to switch to electric unless there is evidence that it is not only cleaner, but equally as efficient and practical. The Bill is intended to create uniformity of charging point connectors, to compel charging point operators to offer a pay-as-you-go option, and to impose penalties on those who do not follow the rules.

I am extremely grateful to have the support of over 25 right hon. and hon. Members—I see some of them here—but I regret that I cannot add all of them as sponsors of the Bill. I hope that the Bill raises questions at the Department for Transport and that the show of support from across the House will lead to a meaningful change in the regulations that will futureproof the use of electric vehicles.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Bill Wiggin, Michael Tomlinson, Helen Goodman, Mr Philip Dunne, Eddie Hughes, Dr Andrew Murrison, Scott Mann, Maria Caulfield, Maggie Throup, Sir Bernard Jenkin, Sir Graham Brady and Rebecca Pow present the Bill.

Bill Wiggin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 March 2019, and to be printed (Bill 291).
Finance (No. 3) Bill

(Clauses 5, 6, 8 to 10, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 38 to 42, 46, 47, 61, 62, 68 to 78, 83, 89 and 90, schedules 3, 4, 7, 8, 15 and 18 and certain new clauses and new schedules)

[2nd ALLOCATED DAY]

Further considered in Committee

[DAME ELEANOR LAING in the Chair]

Clause 61

REMOTE GAMING DUTY: RATE

2.43 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): I beg to move amendment 16, page 44, line 23, leave out “1 October 2019” and insert “1 April 2019”.

This amendment provides for the increase in the rate of remote gaming duty to take effect from 1 April 2019 instead of 1 October 2019.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 11, page 44, line 23, leave out “1 October 2019” and insert “the prescribed date”.

Government amendment 17.

Amendment 12, page 44, line 25, leave out “1 October 2019” and insert “the prescribed date”.

Amendment 13, page 44, line 32, at end insert—

“(4) In this section, ‘the prescribed date’ means the date prescribed in regulations made by statutory instrument by the Secretary of State

(5) The Secretary of State may not make regulations under subsection (4)—

(a) to prescribe a date before 1 October 2019, and

(b) unless regulations under section 236 of the Gambling Act 2005 have been made that amend the definition of sub-category B2 gaming machines so as to define such machines as having a maximum charge for use of no more than £2 with effect from a date no later than 1 April 2019.

(6) In this section, “sub-category B2 gaming machines” has the meaning given in regulation 5(5) of the Categories of Gaming Machine Regulations 2007/2158.”

Clause stand part.

Clause 62 stand part.

That schedule 18 be the Eighteenth schedule to the Bill.

New clause 12—Review of public health effects of gaming provisions—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the public health effects of the provisions of section 61 of and Schedule 18 to this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—

(a) the effects of those provisions in reducing the negative public health effects of gambling, and

(b) the implications for the public finances of the public health effects of—

(i) those provisions, and

(ii) the operation of the law relating to remote gaming duty and gaming duty if those provisions were not given effect.”

This new clause would require a review of the public health effects of gaming provisions.

New clause 13—Report on consultation on certain provisions of this Act (No. 3)—

“(1) No later than two months after the passing of this Act, the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of Commons a report on the consultation undertaken on the provisions in subsection (2).

(2) Those provisions are—

(a) section 61, and

(b) Schedule 18.

(3) A report under this section must specify in respect of each provision listed in subsection (2)—

(a) whether a version of the provision was published in draft, and

(b) if so, whether changes were made as a result of consultation on the draft, and

(c) if not, the reasons why the provision was not published in draft and any consultation which took place on the proposed provision in the absence of such a draft.”

This new clause would require a report on the consultation undertaken on certain provisions of this Act – alongside new clauses 9, 11 and 15.

New clause 16—Review of remote gambling duty—

“(1) The Treasury shall undertake a review of the increase in the rate of remote gambling duty introduced in section (Remote gambling duty (rate)) of this Act.

(2) The review shall consider, in particular, the effects of the rate increase on—

(a) the public revenue,

(b) betting shops, and

(c) gambling related harm.

(3) The Treasury review must include independent advice on the feasibility and impact of bringing forward the date of the increase in remote gaming duty to 1 April 2019.

(4) The Treasury review of the effects of the rate increase in remote gambling duty under subsections (2) and (3) must also take into account any effects of reducing to £2 the maximum stake on B2 machine games with effect from 1 April 2019.

(5) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a copy of a report of the review under this section before the House of Commons no later than 28 days after this Act is passed.”

This new clause requires the Treasury to review the feasibility and impact of bringing forward from October 2019 the implementation of an increase in remote gambling duty, which is linked in paragraph 3.68 of the Budget 2018 Red Book to the implementation of a £2 maximum stake on B2 machine games (fixed-odds betting terminals).

Robert Jenrick: As you have just described, Dame Eleanor, we begin today’s consideration of the Finance Bill with clauses 61 and 62 and schedule 18. The parts of the Bill that we are about to discuss concern rates of remote gaming duty and other gaming duty measures. Gambling policy more generally and its related legislation, such as the Gambling Act, are matters for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and lie outside the scope of a Finance Bill, but I want to explain both the fiscal measures in this Bill and how they interact with wider important matters, such as fixed-odds betting terminals.
Turning briefly to clause 62 and schedule 18, which deal with changes to gambling duty accounting periods, this Government are committed to reducing administrative burdens on businesses and to making the tax system more effective, efficient and simpler. The changes will bring gaming duty paid by land-based casinos in line with other gambling duties. They will allow casinos to roll forward losses and will remove the requirement to pay duty on account, reducing administration for businesses and for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The changes are expected to have a negligible impact on the tax take from casinos, which will continue to be subject to a tax structure that ensures that the most successful casinos pay up to 50% of their profit to support public services. That take will total £250 million to the Exchequer in the current financial year.

I shall turn now to Government amendment 16 and amendment 12, which is in the name of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). Clause 61 deals only with remote gaming duty but, as I said in my opening remarks, the issue is intrinsically linked with fixed-odds betting terminals. My right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have explained the Government’s position to the House since the Budget. The Government have recognised the significant harm that fixed-odds betting terminals can cause to individuals both in money lost that cannot be afforded by many and in mental distress to the gambler and to their friends and family. That is why, having listened to the campaigning voices outside of Parliament and a number of determined colleagues in this House, to whom I will return in a moment, the Government decided to cap the maximum stake of B2 machine games at £2—going considerably further than the Gambling Commission’s recommendation of a cap of less than £30. All the indications are that a state cap at such a level will result in a significant reduction in the amount of money lost by people on these machines, as well as a significant reduction in the number of FOBTs on our high streets—possibly even their complete disappearance.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I hope to speak later if possible, but this is a rare example of when parliamentary arithmetic has got the Government to do something that will be good for them and good for the population. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fixed odds betting terminals, who has led a cross-party group over the years—this is not just about those who have come in lately—to ensure that the arguments are right, as well as the parliamentary arithmetic.

Robert Jenrick: I praise my hon. Friend for his role in this matter, and I will come in due course to the hon. Member for Swansea East and other colleagues who have played a decisive role in these events.

In deciding on a date for implementation, the Government were obliged to consider not just those who would have been harmed by FOBTs, but the impact on wider society—the tens of thousands whose livelihoods would be at risk following the new stake. Stakeholder evidence varied considerably, but it was widely acknowledged that there would be a significant impact, whether as a result of the cap in itself or because the decision to change the cap would bring forward wider changes that were already likely to occur in a sector undergoing a great deal of change as a result of new technology. The Government have not wavered from their commitment to set a £2 stake and considered the best way to mitigate the negative impacts of the policy on the individuals and their employers, giving them time to prepare for the impact if possible. Accordingly, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport published a written statement confirming that a £2 maximum stake will be implemented from April 2019, and we have tabled Government amendment 16 to reflect that.

I will now briefly describe the events leading up to this point. When we announced the decision to reduce the stake, implementation in April 2020 was a date that I discussed with the hon. Member for Swansea East when she came to the Treasury in late spring to talk about the matter. A decision was then taken by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to consult informally with stakeholders and it was then proposed in the Budget to bring forward the date to October 2019. The decision was, I believe, intended in good faith to represent a balance between expeditiously bringing an end to the harm caused by FOBTs and enabling those working in the sector to prepare for the implications for them. None the less, it became abundantly clear that a large number of colleagues disagreed and wished to see the stake change implemented sooner, which is exactly what we have done.

I am grateful for the counsel and the campaigning zeal of a number of Members on both sides of the Chamber, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and, of course, the hon. Member for Swansea East, whom I respect and whom I have enjoyed working alongside throughout this process.

I admire my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who was an outstanding Sports Minister and is a great Member of Parliament. She clearly played a decisive role in the Government’s decision to reduce the stake in the first place and, indeed, to do so expeditiously in April 2019. I have always believed that, in politics as in life, all we have is our reputation, and she chose her principled belief that this change must be implemented as soon as possible over her role in government. I respect that, and I am sure Members on both sides of the Committee do so, too.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I fully accept what the Minister says about the reputation of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), but does he agree that these things should not have necessitated her departure when she was doing such a good job? I do not expect the Minister to express an opinion, just that it would have been better otherwise.

Robert Jenrick: I clearly hear my right hon. Friend’s point, and I have fairly set out the chain of events that led to this moment. As I said, I enormously respect my
hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford and her decision. When I was first elected to Parliament, an elderly constituent sent me a quote by John Quincy Adams:

"Always vote for principle, though you may vote alone, and you may cherish the sweetest reflection that your vote is never lost."

On this occasion, of course, my hon. Friend is not alone, and I am grateful for her work in this area.

Government amendment 17 complements Government amendment 16, both of which relate to amendments 12 and 13. As I have just set out, the Government recognise the strong will of the House that the implementation date for the new maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals be brought forward to April 2019. The Treasury has been clear throughout the process that we do not seek to use the issue of FOBTs to increase Exchequer revenues, but we do have a responsibility, which I hope Members on both sides of the Committee will recognise, to protect the public finances and to ensure that we have the means to fund our public services. The cost of eliminating the damage caused by FOBTs must not be paid for by our having fewer doctors, fewer teachers and fewer people working in mental healthcare.

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I welcome this change. In my constituency there are betting shops sandwiched between pubs and chemists giving out substitution treatments. Does the Minister not agree that the savings to the public purse from preventing people from falling into problematic debt, and preventing highly addicted people from falling into other troubles and needing to rely on the NHS and other services, will be far greater than the tax received from these gambling machines?

**Robert Jenrick:** My hon. Friend makes an important point that has been raised by many others and that I am sure was a significant contributor to the decision of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to take this action.

The point I am making is a separate one; that in making the decision to reduce the cap on FOBTs, we want to ensure that the Exchequer can protect its revenues so it can continue to fund public services. To do so, clause 61 increases the rate of remote gaming duty to 21% from 15%, and amendment 17 complements amendment 16 by ensuring that both changes are implemented at the same time in April 2019.

Throughout this process the Treasury has been clear that we want to raise only a commensurate sum of money to protect public services, and that we want to ensure that both the stake change and the change in taxation occur at the same time. That is exactly what we intend to do. This increase applied to anyone who offers online games of chance to UK players, including online roulette, online poker and online slots. This change should ensure that we take decisive action on FOBTs without having to cut services or raise taxes on those outside the gambling sector. To recognise this, I ask the Committee not to press amendments 12 and 13 and to support Government amendment 17.

New clause 12 would require the Chancellor to prepare a report describing the public health effects of the gambling clauses in this Finance Bill, for publication before the House within six months of Royal Assent. The Government take the impact of gambling on individuals’ health seriously, which is why we have listened to Members on both sides of the House and taken the action we have on FOBTs. This summer the Gambling Commission published a well-received paper on how to measure gambling-related harms, setting out how it intends to move forward in such a large and vital area of analysis. I hope that colleagues on both sides of the Committee agree that the Gambling Commission should be left to carry out its important work in this area without the Treasury attempting to carry out its own competing analysis on the very limited effect on public health of a change in accounting periods, which is what the new clause would bring into effect.

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): I welcome that assessment, but does the Minister accept that the assessment needs to look at the various forms of gambling and that it also needs to consider the amount of gambling advertising presented to people on our television screens?

**Robert Jenrick:** As a parent and as a citizen I am concerned, like the hon. Gentleman, about the amount of gambling advertising on television and elsewhere, but that is not a matter for the Finance Bill; it is a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and for the Gambling Commission.

As I have just described, new clause 12 would achieve only the Treasury producing a very limited analysis of the public health impact of the change in accounting period set out in the Finance Bill. I therefore urge the Committee not to press new clause 12.

New clause 13 proposes a report on the consultation undertaken on the detail of clause 61 on remote gaming duty and of schedule 18 on gaming duty. Although we have had much debate on the content and implications of clause 61, it is in fact very simple: it is a rate change, and the Government would not normally consult on such a change. I reassure the Committee that we have gone over and above the usual convention in such cases. The increase was originally proposed in May 2018, and my officials, alongside the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, have since worked with interested parties on its detail. We believe we are in a good position.

I fully reassure the Committee that the change made by clause 61 was consulted on last year. In addition, schedule 18 was published as a clause in the draft Finance Bill in July 2018. It has therefore been subject to scrutiny and comment by stakeholders ever since. I hope my comments will reassure the Committee that there is no need for a further report into our consultation on these issues, and I therefore ask that new clause 13 not be pressed.

New clause 16 returns to an issue with which I began this debate. The new clause asks for a review of the feasibility of bringing forward the rise in remote gaming duty in clause 61 to April 2019. As I have tried to reassure right hon. and hon. Members, we have already covered these matters—they were considered before my right hon. Friend the Chancellor tabled amendments 16 and 17, which will bring forward the date to April 2019—and I therefore respectfully ask that new clause 16 not be pressed.

I look forward to listening to the contributions of right hon. and hon. Members to this debate. The Government amendments to these clauses represent the
action on FOBTs that the country demanded and for which Members on both sides of the House have campaigned assiduously over many years. The changes will now be delivered as expeditiously as possible and in a fiscally responsible manner that protects public services. I commend these changes to the Committee.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Well, where to begin? I can sum up the Minister’s speech as, “Nothing to see here.”

Before I move on to the detail of this issue, I want to pay tribute to Members on both sides of the House who forced the Government to bring forward the FOBT stake reduction from October 2019 to April 2019, which will be implemented through the amendment before the Committee. Particular recognition goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is to be warmly congratulated on her tireless work for social justice, in all its incarnations, and to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), the shadow Secretary of State, who is not in the Chamber, but has spoken about this issue many times from the Dispatch Box.

I also want to recognise the unique contribution made by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), whose principled resignation eventually shamed the Government into action. She has spoken of the human cost that prompted her resignation and the Government’s U-turn. She said, simply, that she had “held the hands of too many addicts who have contemplated suicide, or the families left behind because loved ones saw no other way out... to be able to justify or even explain the delay.”

She added last week: “I don’t feel vindicated by the welcome decision to ditch the delay and bring forward the stake reduction to April next year. I just feel relieved.”

I think I speak for Members across the House when I say she has indeed been vindicated. Her relief will be shared not just in the House but, more importantly, outside it.

The six-month delay that the Government had wanted to implement would have affected hundreds of lives—even worse, it would have threatened them. These are lives that matter to people’s families and those around them, and to the former Minister. So just what arguments were used and, apparently, accepted by the Chancellor, to argue for that delay? It was said that the industry needed time to “adapt”—come on, really? The sector could hardly claim ignorance of the will in this House to take such steps. Let us be brutally honest with ourselves: this was ultimately just another way of saying that profits come before lives.

Of course, we also heard a strong hint that there was slightly more to this. In her resignation letter, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford told of how the planned delay to reduced stakes came as a result of “commitments made by others to those with registered interests”. What a damning indictment that statement is. It is an accusation that goes right to the very top of this Government, where those decisions were made. This is the Government who repeatedly tell the House they can be trusted when it comes to tackling vested interests—from tax avoiders to exploitative slum landlords; from rogue bosses to rip-off utilities. The Government say that they will tackle “burning injustices”, but I am afraid that the shoddy debacle of this ignominious U-turn suggests very much otherwise.

Let us go back to the supposed evidence on which the Treasury based the original decision: the 15,000 to 21,000 job losses in the betting industry that were supposedly threatened. That was what the Chancellor himself admitted when he appeared before the Treasury Committee. The estimate comes from a KPMG report funded by the Association of British Bookmakers. Both the Government and the industry have refused to make the report available for public scrutiny, but I have a copy of it here, and I believe it is right that this House scrutinises it. Frankly, the report should never have had such an integral role in determining Government policy. Such policy is meant to act in the interests of all citizens, but this Government based their decisions not on evidence, as we would expect, but on pandering to corporate vested interests.

The report claims that the average betting shop, of which there are 8,500, will make on average, before the change to legislation, a net annual profit of £87,291. Page 11 describes what “at risk of closure” actually means, which is that once the £2 cap is implemented, just under half of those shops would make a net annual profit of £20,000 or less.

Graham P. Jones: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. If the gambling industry was so concerned about employees, perhaps it ought to have given consideration to the number of single-staffed bookmakers that have arisen because of FOBTs. We are talking about young and vulnerable female staff working late at night in the bookmaking industry. It is too late for the industry to complain about the staff now when it did not care about them in the first place. Does he share that view?

Clive Lewis: My hon. Friend makes his excellent point well, and I agree with it entirely.

Page 11 of that report describes what “at risk of closure” actually means. It means that once the £2 cap is implemented, just under half of those shops would make a net annual profit of £20,000 or less. Are we seriously to believe that a net profit of £20,000 a year is terminal? KPMG did not think so. The report concludes that these shops would not close, but would simply be “less profitable”. The threat was not to our constituents’ jobs, but to corporate profits. Can the Minister assure Members that the Treasury will never again seek to justify resisting evidence-based policy on the basis of secret reports and clandestine meetings?

By choosing to take such an approach, the Treasury ignored the recommendation in the May 2018 gambling review that the £2 limit should be adopted within nine to 12 months. Let us remember that that policy was designed to reduce the harm caused by gambling addiction. The evidence of harm associated with FOBTs is overwhelming, with that harm disproportionately felt by the poorest in our society. Put simply, there are twice as many betting shops in the poorest 55 boroughs of the UK as there are in the most affluent 115.

Even in narrow economic terms, viewing the delay as merely a reduction in tax income to the Exchequer makes little sense. As we have heard today, the social cost of addiction, crime and debt that accompanies the
ever-increasing losses on FOBTs is estimated by the Centre for Economics and Business Research to cost the UK £1.5 billion a year. It has an impact on many aspects of social welfare, including employment, mental health and financial stability, so the awful human cost, about which we have heard so powerfully, is matched by an economic cost that we all bear as a society and as an economy as well. Perhaps the Minister would address whether the Government have factored into any of their fiscal calculations the prospect of alleviating the cost to public services, given a decline in gambling-related harm and crime?

Of course, the most important reason for an immediate stake reduction is a moral one—an issue of social justice that must be resolved. Lives are being destroyed, and this policy change is a milestone on our journey to tackle this harm. Labour Members are proud be part of this cross-party process, in which I respect of this being a cross-party process, in which I was a very cross-party process. Interestingly, the list of hon. Friends in this case, although I am not sure they will want to be pursuing that one further. This genuinely is something that preys on people’s vulnerabilities. Labour Members recognise that quite clearly.

Mr Duncan Smith: I want to summarise some of the issues relating to the amendments standing in my name and those of many others, including, most importantly, my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan)—they are hon. Friends in this case, although I am not sure they will want to be pursuing that one further. This genuinely was a very cross-party process. Interestingly, the list of names of Members who support the amendments tells us everything we need to know about the strength of feeling that existed in the House.

We accept the Government’s change, to which I shall come back in a moment, but it is worth reminding ourselves that this process has had a long gestation. I remember having conversations with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) probably two years ago, at least—

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Three.

Mr Duncan Smith: It was a long time ago, and even then we discussed the specific problems with fixed odds betting terminals, along with wider issues. There was this long process of gestation, and then the hon. Members for Swansea East and for Inverclyde got involved and the all-party group was formed. I congratulate them on managing to get things on to a much more even keel in respect of this being a cross-party process, in which I played a part.

We arrived at the point when we had finally persuaded the Government, with massive internal support from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, that it was necessary for us to make this change, given that these machines, although not alone in this, were peculiarly addictive. It was accepted that they led to a higher level of addiction and had dramatically changed the nature of betting shops. Years ago, when gambling was liberalised under a previous Government, I said, given my involvement in some of the studies, that I thought that was a mistake. When it comes to widening and liberalising gambling, the situation is not like in any other industry. It really is not just about jobs and businesses, because change involves people making decisions that are not about positive life outcomes. Thus, the situation needs to be treated separately. I remember the discussions about super-casinos, when I said that I was appalled by the idea that establishing a super-casino would somehow regenerate a town. I said, “It won’t regenerate the town. It will make it descend, and everything will then hinge around the behaviour of people in and around the massive casino.” That is by the by; liberalisation became the process.

I was really pleased when the Government finally agreed to reduce the stake to £2. My goodness, what a peculiar argument we had. We heard the Gambling Commission and the gambling industry asking many times why we would not go to £30 rather than £2. The slow extraction of teeth in this process was fascinating to behold. The worst bit for me and, I am sure, for my colleagues, was hearing the endless testimony about the families’ lives that had been blighted by this terrible addiction. Even though I was opposed to FOBTs, I had not been aware of the real human harm being caused, because one does not see it, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford knows, that was the real driver behind why we wanted to act. It was really quite moving to hear the stories at first hand and to see families’ dedication to never allowing others to get into such a situation.

I was really proud of my Government for making the decision and accepting that there was a need for change. We thought the process was done. I argued for making the change this October, because there was no point in hanging around. I thought that we did not need to worry about the gambling industry, because it would make whatever changes were necessary and it gets a lot of money anyway, so I was not that bothered about it. I remember the discussion about why we were not acting in October, and we reluctantly agreed that perhaps 1 April would give the industry time. The next thing we heard was that the date had gone back to 1 April 2020—the following year—which was never agreed.

All of a sudden, the Government then said that they had agreed to make the change in October 2019, which they said was an advance of six months, and we said was a delay of six months. We established that the gambling industry would make well over a billion pounds during that six months. The real problem was why there was a delay, as it was clear that, as the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) said on behalf of the Opposition, the gambling report said nine to 12 months, and nine to 12 months from the date of the original decision took us to approximately April or May the next year. All that was part of the consideration. We had debates about why the date had gone back and, although I will not make a big thing about this, I did say to my right hon. and hon. Friends in government that they needed to put it back to 1 April. At the time of the Budget, their date was rejected.

3.15 pm

I am genuinely sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford eventually had to make her statement. I have resigned, and it is not an easy process, but the worst thing is when someone resigns only to find that days later the Government actually do what they were being asked to do internally. I know it is politics and that all things change, but I say to my hon. Friend that all is not lost, in the sense that she has
gained the respect—if she did not already have it—of a number of people in this House. More important, I hope, is the recognition that people of honour and decency in a Government can never be long outside that Government. I therefore hope that the Government pay attention and rectify the situation as soon as possible.

I was very keen to get the change brought forward, but I was told that there was no way on earth that we could force the Government to bring it forward, because by convention we could not bring forward a tax, because it is a tax rise. I thank enormously the Public Bill Office and the Clerks, who helped us to figure out that although we may not be able to raise a tax, we sure as ever can make sure that the Government can never raise a tax. Once the amendment was tabled and everyone signed it, the position was obvious. Our amendments and new clause have been the key driver modifying the Government’s opinion on this matter, which is never a bad thing. I am glad that they have listened. I fully accept that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary recognises that this is the right thing to do.

In agreeing that we will not press our amendments and new clause to a vote, for obvious reasons—the Government are committed to making the changes, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary on doing so—I should say that I understand that a report to be published tomorrow that will show that gambling addiction among young people is now spiking at its highest ever level. That report is not out yet, so I guess it is not reportable, but it will show the very thing we have been on about: there is a genuine and serious problem that strikes at the heart of the lives of those who can least afford it. This addiction to gambling—we are given on television the constant sense that unless someone is a smart, clever, successful individual who gambles, they must be odd and pointless, and we see the idea that a person is successful because they can do the odds and get them right—is perverse and damaging.

I say to my hon. Friends and colleagues in this campaign that it is not over. We now have to turn our attention to the next level, as it is high time that we looked carefully at what is going on through the advertising and promotion of an industry that may well damage huge numbers of lives. In accepting the Government’s position, I put down a simple point: I will continue to campaign with my colleagues and move on to the next level. It is time for us to bring the issue under control, and this is only the start.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to speak today, Dame Eleanor? I am delighted to say that the Members who tabled and put their names to the amendments and new clause will not press them to a vote because—in case anybody has not heard—the Government finally saw sense and backed down on the implementation date for the reduction of stakes on fixed odds betting terminals. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you.

I stand instead to make a point: the power of the Back Benchers cannot be ignored. This House is fortunate to have so many Members, on all Benches, who are prepared to put principle before both profits and politics. I pay special tribute to my colleagues in this place and the other, and I pay special tribute to the hon. Members for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and to the wonderful hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), whose principles led to her resignation. I thank them all for their support, dedication and downright determination to force the Government’s hand.

The result has been a long time coming, but this issue has demonstrated the very best of this House, where politicians of all persuasions came together, united in seeking to make sure that the Government were held to account for their reluctance to put people’s lives ahead of company profits. The Government had so many opportunities to do the right thing, but they seemed determined to pander to the whim of an industry set to make nearly £1 billion of profit in the six-month period between April and October 2019. It is regrettable that it took strong-arm tactics by Members to convince them to make the change and that they did not come to a principled decision on the morality of the problem—the devastation that these machines have caused to individuals, communities and families.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady and everyone who has played a part in this campaign. Is it not tragic that it has taken this House 17 years to sort out the matter? We are congratulating ourselves on having achieved something, but, in those 17 years, we are fully aware of the lives that have been wrecked by our inactivity. Thank goodness that we have got it right now.

Carolyn Harris: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman.

May I just say that I cannot thank the Government? As much as I respect and like the Minister, I can say only one thing: learn lessons from this and never underestimate the power of principle.

Tracey Crouch: I wish to take only a few minutes of the Chamber’s time on amendments 11, 12 and 13, which I signed, and on the Government’s amendments 16 and 17 that relate to the reduction in stake for fixed odds betting terminals and the increase in remote gaming duty.

I am relieved that the Chancellor reconsidered his position on the timeframe for the increase for RGD and therefore the reduction in stakes from £100 to £2. Although it was not technically necessary to link the two, the whole House does, I think, understand the financial challenge that the Treasury faces and therefore the need for fiscal responsibility.

The Government made the right decision to reduce stakes on B2 machines as part of their gambling review, not least because it was proven throughout the review that players of these machines have the highest rates of problem gambling and that 32% of players are considered at risk of harm. Concerns around problem and harmful gambling were further amplified by the location of B2 gaming machines in areas of high deprivation. The review also found that those who are unemployed are more likely to most often stake £100 than any other socioeconomic group.

Although the review looked at very many aspects of gambling, it was right that there was a wider public and parliamentary focus on FOBTs and that we took
decisive action. The impact assessment made it clear that we expected an implementation date within nine to 12 months and the Government’s amendments honour that expectation.

I am grateful that the Chancellor listened to the House on this matter, although I am sorry that it needed the much louder collective voice for the message to be heard. All that needs to be said has been said, except my personal thanks to the 3,000-plus people who have contacted me since my resignation, the faith leaders who spoke out, the 100-plus colleagues who put their name to the all-party group’s amendments and the brilliant Clerks who helped to craft them.

I have just one other question for the Minister, and it relates to new clause 12. Although the new clause is very limited and there is already a strong framework within the Gambling Commission, I ask that, as an extra protection, the Minister consider supporting this additional review today.

I have no intention of shadow-boxing the new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who is a friend and will be excellent in her job, but others have noted that there are many challenges on gambling, including harm to children, online harms and advertising. The review sets out many recommendations to tackle those issues, and I look forward to watching her progress with interest.

I have met many people over the past few years who themselves have been addicted to gambling or who have lost loved ones to gambling. The treatment services that are there for them are very good and are run and supported by excellent people, many of whom are volunteers, but they are still the Cinderella service. I am pleased that the Health Secretary has continued his interest in this matter. I am sure that new clause 12 will help further that public health aspect.

I am in no doubt that what this Government have done today with these amendments will save lives from devastation and that is surely what we all go into politics for.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I rise to speak to new clauses 12 and 13. We are all fully aware that the Government have declared their intention to introduce a new £2 maximum stake on fixed odds betting terminals, as has been documented already this afternoon. Getting the Government to this stage has not been easy, but thankfully they have seen the light. After considerable cross-party pressure, they have also agreed that the date of implementation will be in April 2019. That is extremely welcome news, and it came about because they were forced to look at the evidence gathered by the all-party group on FOBTs and not rely on the flawed KPMG report that was steered by the bookmakers’ parameters.

I now expect the Government to do the decent thing and amend the Bill accordingly. This would not have happened without the superb work and commitment of the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). That brought us nicely to new clause 12, entitled, “A review of public health effects on gaming provisions”, which stands in my name. Not that long ago, gambling was restricted to on-course and off-course bookmakers. Other types of gambling existed, but, for the majority of people, casinos were the stuff of James Bond movies, while bingo and the football pools were once a week and deemed to be sociable and aspirational.

Over time and with the advent of new technology, the face of gambling has changed. Through our mobile phones, we have access to gambling 24 hours a day, every day of the year. The first and most obvious outcome is that there is no cooling-off period. Gamblers caught up in the heat of the moment will not run out of races or be asked to leave the premises; quite the reverse, pernicious advertising with offers of free spins and money-back guarantees are used as bait to lure the most vulnerable gamblers, and eventually many are hooked. When I googled “Gambling Clinics UK”, the first two hits on the list were not organisations offering me help, but paid-for adverts for casino sites.

Graham P. Jones: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making a very powerful point, and I did not want to interrupt him mid-flow, but will he add to that list of problems the misuse of gambling accounts? That needs to be looked at, because gambling accounts are misused so that people become addicted. When people fall away and manage their addiction, they are dragged back in through gambling accounts, and that should be something that this House considers.

Ronnie Cowan: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. A second point is that there are dormant betting accounts with money in them but we cannot access them. If that money could be released and freed up for gambling care, there would be more money in the pot to do some good.

Meanwhile, our TVs are haunted by advertising aimed at the most vulnerable. We even have products aimed at grooming children to be the next generation of gamblers. The gambling industry has to ask itself some very serious questions about its marketing strategy. I wish to thank Hamleys toy store for moving swiftly to remove a product deemed undesirable from its shops across the UK when I brought it to its attention. Our children must be protected. For the majority of adults, gambling is fun.

Paul Masterton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and also for all the work that he has done as part of the all-party group. Does he share my concern about the number of apps aimed at young children, which are effectively based around the concept of gambling? Although they may not be what he or I would consider to be gambling, the sort of behaviour and the risk-reward elements involved seem to ingrain that behaviour from a very young age, which is deeply concerning.

Ronnie Cowan: It is particularly disturbing when we know that people are sitting back and designing these apps in precisely that manner. They know exactly what they are doing, but they do not seem to have any conscience that will stop them from doing it.

For the majority of adults, gambling is fun—if it is under control. Many people can set a limit and not go beyond it. While I would pay for a ticket to a concert or a rugby match, their chosen form of expenditure for entertainment is gambling, and I am not questioning
their choice. However, when we offer a licensed product that has the potential to damage the customer, we need to take steps to ensure that the possibility of damage and the consequences of that damage are as limited as possible. Gambling-related harm caused by an addiction to gambling is as much a public health issue as damage caused by drugs and alcohol, but it is not always seen that way.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman, together with every Member who has spoken so far, joined me at the launch of Gambling with Lives, a charity set up by two of my constituents who lost their son to suicide as a result of gambling addiction. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the significance of suicide as a consequence for many who are addicted to gambling, given that half those who are addicted consider suicide at some stage? Set within the range of public health issues, this simply underlines the powerful points made by every Member so far.

3.30 pm

Ronnie Cowan: I categorically agree with the hon. Gentleman’s sentiments. I will briefly touch on that matter later. It is a very sensitive subject; the wonderful new organisation, Gambling with Lives, should not have to exist in the first place, but we all recognise the terrible need for it.

People with drug or alcohol addictions are often more visible in society. Problematic gamblers often seem to be living perfectly normal lives, even to those closest to them, yet we know that suicide due to gambling debt and/or addiction is all too common.

Tracey Crouch: Further to the point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), it is worth remembering that Thursday will be the anniversary of Jack Ritchie taking his own life. It is therefore really important that we think about suicide as an important issue in this debate. It is certainly one of the issues that drove my position for many years.

Ronnie Cowan: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point.

A report issued by the Gambling Commission in August 2017 found that more than 2 million people in the UK are either problem gamblers or are at risk of addiction, that the number of over-16s deemed to be problem gamblers has grown by a third in three years and that at-risk gamblers are most likely to be aged between 16 and 24. The National Problem Gambling Clinic—there is only one—is based in Fulham, under the watchful eye of Henrietta Bowden-Jones. I have visited the clinic, but I wonder how many Ministers with responsibility pertaining to gambling have? I believe that the Health Secretary has and all credit to him for doing so. The evidence is out there, but we must go looking for it.

GamCare tells me there are plans to create a gambling clinic in Leeds. I applaud that and hope that such a network can be built across the UK. That brings us to funding. The current funding model is not adequate or robust enough. Relying on a voluntary levy means that long-term planning is, ironically, a gamble. The practicality of a statutory levy must be investigated and realistic sums of money must be guaranteed if we are to take the necessary action to support and guide those affected by problematic gambling.

The new legislation around fixed odds betting terminals is proof that with the proper evidence, a little persuasion and the desire to do the right thing, this Government can improve the situation. That is why the Scottish National party is calling for a review of the public health effects of gaming provisions and a report to be laid before the House of Commons within six months. Only by gathering valid data from independent sources can the Government take an evidence-based approach to gambling legislation and thus ensure that the industry can continue, while fulfilling its moral duty to protect vulnerable gamblers.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that I was going to come on to indirectly, but I will now make it directly. These fixed odds betting terminals were not allowed in betting shops in the Republic of Ireland, so how could the Association of...
British Bookmakers go around thinking that it was normal? That leaves open the question that he has raised: how can we make sure that people in Northern Ireland get the change they need? If it is a devolved matter and we need a Northern Ireland Government to solve the problem, I do not have an instant solution.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yes, it is a devolved matter and it would take the Assembly to make those decisions. We do not have a working Assembly, as the hon. Gentleman knows. In the meantime, therefore, nothing happens in relation to legislation that is passing here. It is my intention, after discussions with the Minister involved and with the support of the House, of course, to try to ensure that this legislation is Northern Ireland-bound, as it should be.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The Committee will recognise the importance of what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I am very grateful for it.

Some of the tactics used by the betting shop owners have been disgraceful. I hope that some investigative journalist will write it up, page by page, date by date, and explain how it has been counterproductive for these companies’ own shareholders. GVC, which in March this year confirmed the takeover of Ladbrokes Coral, will pay £800 million less because of the date of the change to £2. Three years ago, William Hill’s share price was about 400p a share. At the time of the discussion about whether the fixed odds betting terminal limit would come down to £2 either in October next year or in April the year after, its share price fluctuated between 300p and 220p per share. It is now less than 180p. For every month it went on with its campaign, it destroyed the value of its shareholders’ stake in the companies that were taking profits—as was the Treasury, in tax—from these unbelievably unjustified machines.

When Paddy Power said that these machines were not needed for betting shops, other gambling companies should have paid attention. When people write up this failure of lobbying and the counterproductive tactics used, I hope that they will take it as a role model. We need a word to describe Parliament asserting itself to Government, but another two words to respond to the way in which Government have reacted to that, and those words should be, “Thank you.”

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I rise to speak in support of new clause 12. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), who have done a power of work on this issue.

I very much welcome the UK Government’s decision to abandon the delay in implementing a maximum £2 stake on fixed odds betting terminals. It is a cause of great regret that this delay was even considered, “due to commitments made by others to those with registered interests”, according to the former Minister, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), to whom I pay tribute for the stand that she has taken on this issue throughout. It is truly disappointing that it has taken so long to achieve the reduction in the maximum stake for these machines—so much time, despite the cross-party support for it across the House, and the loss of a Minister. Parliament has the power to do good, and when it decides to do good it should do so as quickly as it can without fuss or drama—even more so when vulnerable people’s lives literally depend on it.

Like many Members, I am sure, I have a particular constituency interest in this issue. In North Ayrshire, most of which I represent, there are 137 of these machines in 37 betting shops, with £5 million lost in 2016 alone. Two problem gamblers take their own life every single day in the UK. Any delay to serve vested interests would be unforgivable. Many of us have been profoundly impatient, but I am really grateful, as so many people are, that this Government have at last seen sense and that these machines, which truly are the crack cocaine of gambling, will now be the focus of targeted action.

Conducting a public health review of gaming provisions is absolutely the right thing to do. Gambling-related harm is simply not accorded the attention that it needs. It is a profoundly serious public health issue, and a public health approach is essential. New clause 12 would require a review of the public health effects of gambling. Public health and gambling are issues that cannot be separated, and that is why new clause 12 is so important.

I used to work in a high street bookmaker, long before the advent of fixed odds betting terminals, and despite what bookmakers might tell us now, I have yet to meet a bookmaker who is living in poverty. These shops are open simply to house these machines. Bookmakers might talk about the threat to jobs posed by the reduction in the maximum stake, but the biggest threat to jobs in the betting industry is the use of self-service machines for people to put their bets on, which does away with frontline staff.

The Gambling Commission has pointed out that out that any public health approach needs to address not only those who have lived with the addiction of gambling for some time, but the effects on young and vulnerable people. According to the Gambling Commission, children and young people need a specific focus among those who are potentially vulnerable. Their needs are different, and we may need a different approach to reducing gambling-related harm. We have heard today about apps targeted at children. Primary prevention efforts can be targeted at young people, often aiming to reach them before they have gambled. Treatment for young people with gambling problems needs serious and separate consideration from adult treatment. In most cases, it is likely to require a lower threshold for intervention and other co-occurring problematic behaviours to be addressed.

It is also essential that a public health approach addresses the effects of gambling on the families and close associates of gamblers and on the wider community, as well as on those who suffer harm from their own gambling. The approach needs to recognise that a successful strategy cannot focus solely on individual gamblers, but needs to encompass products, environments, marketing and the wider context in which gambling occurs. It needs to understand that restrictions on, or interventions related to, any of those aspects can form part of a balanced approach, backed up by accurate, objective, accessible and understandable information. It should seek to ensure efficient distribution of resources for prevention and treatment based on need.

It is important to remember that we are not starting from scratch. Vital work in this field has already been done by the Gambling Commission, among others.
We know that most people gamble responsibly with no difficulties. However, some individuals experience significant harm as a result of their gambling. It is estimated that there are around 373,000 problem gamblers in England, 30,000 in Scotland and 27,000 in Wales. According to the Gambling Commission, those estimates are likely to be conservative. For problem gamblers, harm can include higher levels of physical and mental illness, debt problems, relationship breakdown and, in some cases, criminality. It can also be associated with substance misuse.

In many cases, it is difficult to attribute those negative effects solely or directly to gambling, but according to the Gambling Commission, the association is far too strong to ignore. Younger males and people from certain social and ethnic groups are potentially more vulnerable than others. About 1.7 million individuals in England, 180,000 in Scotland and 95,000 in Wales are classified as being at risk of problem gambling. There are also some gamblers who would not be classified as problem or at-risk gamblers, but who may on occasion experience harm as a result of their gambling.

Gambling-related harms are not all directly health harms, but many of the harms, such as debt, are connected with poor health status. A public health approach is absolutely integral to any war on the effects of problem gambling. All the evidence suggests that this is a significant public health issue. It has not yet received the attention it should have relative to other population-level concerns, but that is now in order—the time has come.

3.45 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very good point about the public health impact. Does she agree that people in some of the communities that she and I represent are already struggling with multiple deprivation, and gambling being concentrated in their areas only makes that worse and worsens their life chances?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. There is a correlation between multiple social deprivation factors and problem gambling, which is why certain communities have a higher concentration of betting shops housing these machines—the crack cocaine machines of gambling—than there otherwise would be.

I say to the Minister, and I know he is listening, that we absolutely and urgently need a review of the public health effects of gaming provisions. On that basis, I urge the House to support new clause 12—

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I was about to finish, but obviously I will let the Minister speak.

Robert Jenrick: Before the hon. Lady concludes her remarks, may I draw her attention to two things? I am told that Public Health England has been asked by the Department of Health and Social Care to inform and support action on gambling and its related harms as part of its follow-up to the DCMS review of gaming machines and social responsibility. Public Health England is also being commissioned by the Gambling Commission to do an evidence review on problem gaming, which I hope will go some way to answering the questions that she and others have raised today.

On new clause 12, which the hon. Lady raised—other hon. Members have also done so, including my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch)—I am content for the Government to support it, but I would simply say that it is very limited in scope. I would not want to raise expectations that it will achieve all of the goals that the hon. Lady seeks. However, that, allied to Public Health England’s work, will perhaps help to continue the public debate on this matter.

Patricia Gibson: I am glad that the Minister has given us that clarification. As he says, I would be more comfortable with a broadbrush approach encompassing lots and lots of factors, such as those I set out in my speech. However, I have listened to what the Minister has said, and I will certainly give it some thought.

Jim Shannon: I thought the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) was going to go before me, but he has not bobbed, so he is obviously not going to. I always follow in his footsteps—I am always glad to do so, by the way, as he knows—but on this occasion I miss his comments, which I am sure would be more than helpful to us.

We are all very aware of the reason for these amendments. It is tremendous to be in the Chamber among many Members from across the House who are of the same opinion, including—he will forgive me if I say this, but I have to say it—perhaps a wee bit belatedly, the Minister, who is also committed to where we are on this.

If she does not mind my saying so, I would like to commend the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) for her principled stand, her courage and what she has done to make this happen. The commitment she has shown does my heart good and does the heart of everybody else good. By the way, I am not surprised that she said 3,000 people had contacted her afterwards. I did not have 3,000 people contact me afterwards, but I had a large number and, for the record, every one of them commended the hon. Lady for her obvious commitment. The reason for the amendment is simple: the need for a massive lowering of stakes is clear.

I also thank my good friend, the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for all her endeavours through the all-party group on FOBTs, which has done tremendous work. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) have also endeavoured, through the APPG, to ensure all that hard work came to fruition.

The one thing that sits in my mind is this: why was it important to have those six months slip back from October to April? It is very simple: as has been said, 300 lives—maybe more—were saved. That is a fact.

I am mindful that last week we had the Gambling with Lives event, which the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) referred to. I thank him for initiating that event. I was very glad to be there with other Members and to support him. There were two people there who I knew long before the start of this FOBT campaign, which began about 18 months or two years ago. They are Mr and Mrs Peter Keogh from Enniskillen, who lost their son, Lewis, to a gambling addiction and who even today feel the heartache of that event.
It is for those people that we do these things. It is for our constituents whose lives will be saved because of it, and for those who have lost loved ones and feel the great pain of the loss of someone close to them, that today we can collectively make this legislative change in this House. That is why we make the effort.

The Government accept that they need to lower the stakes; they accept that damage has been done to individuals and families; they accept the fact that the ability to bet as much as £100 every 20 seconds on electronic casino games such as roulette is shocking; and they accept the campaign by anti-gambling campaigners that highlights the fact that machines let people lose money too quickly, leading to addiction and social, mental and financial problems.

The Minister responded to the previous speaker, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), about things we must address, including online gambling and how it is promoted on TV. At this early stage, I would also like to put down a marker about scratchcards. I was just telling a story to my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan). One day, I saw a lady with two children in a shop. She probably did not have £5 to spare. She was ahead of me in the queue and she put down £5. I was not being nosy, but her wallet probably only had two fivers in it, yet she spent £5 on scratchcards. She went outside to rub the numbers off them and by the time I went outside I saw that not one of the cards was successful.

I thought to myself, “How very sad.” That lady was probably looking at her financial needs for that week being provided by the turn of a scratchcard, which did not deliver. Other things need to be done, but I look forward to the things that the Minister referred to in his intervention on the hon. Lady.

Those arguments had all been accepted, but rather than looking at the human cost it appears that the Government wished to shore up the finances and allow thousands more people to gamble everything away. The situation is like cancer research finding a cure to cancer and the NHS saying, “Well, we have all the chemotherapy, which needs to be used, so we won’t pay for the life-saving drugs until stocks are down. We can’t afford to do this.” That is horrific. I say to the Minister, with respect, that the more I see of this Government’s ability to put blinkers on and look only at one aspect—the pounds rather than looking at the human cost it appears that the Government’s decision making is as flawed here as it is in selling Northern Ireland and the backstop. Do the Government think that taxpayers in the United Kingdom would not pay more for the life of a child in Northern Ireland?

That is why we are keen for the Government to implement as soon as practicable the proposed maximum stake limit of £2 for FOBTs. It is of some concern that in the Budget the timeframe for implementation was to have been delayed to October 2019. We note that some campaigners said it would be possible to implement it in April 2019 and that the Government have acceded to that. That apparent delay was deeply disappointing. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green referred to the amendment with over 100 Members’ names on it. What changed the Government’s opinion was those 100 names from across the Chamber. I am very pleased that we have achieved that change.

I agree with the change and I ask the Government simply to do the right thing. They seem to have been held to ransom by the gaming industry. Therefore, it should not have surprised me to see how the EU—I use this comparison; I am sure many Members will understand it—has held this proud nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ransom, and how our Government have capitulated at the cost not of £400 million, the estimated lost tax revenue, but £39 billion, and, most importantly, the sovereignty of Northern Ireland and the sanctity of the Union.

You may not believe that the two are linked, Dame Eleanor, but they are. You may not believe that that should be mentioned in this debate, but it has been. The Government’s decision making is as flawed here as it is in selling Northern Ireland and the backstop. Do the right thing, stop allowing gambling addictions to destroy families and protect people from themselves, in the same way that people must wear a seatbelt whether they want to or not. Step in and step up. I support the amendment and I look forward to working with hon. Members to do even more in this Chamber to address gambling addiction in the years to come.

Amendment 16 agreed to.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate my hon. Friend’s reference to the Salvation Army. One of the other issues that I have major concerns about—I wonder whether my hon. Friend agrees—is the accounts of people being given a line of credit of £1,500 without any credit checks on their ability to pay it back. People have been given a £1,500 line of credit and unfortunately it ends up being a potential noose—and I mean that—around their neck. That problem is arising and it is caused by those who do not do checks. Any other financial industry would do checks to ensure the person had the ability to pay the money back.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his wise intervention.

The Salvation Army also says:

“Another man who became homeless as a result of his addiction and who was helped by the Salvation Army lost over £30,000 on gambling machines.”

I do not think that there is one Member in this Chamber who would not be able to recollect a story of this kind from their constituencies. It is the story of the man who plays on a FOBT machine on a Friday night and puts all his wages on it, before going home to his wife, who is looking for the money to buy the groceries, and their children. Those are the stories of real life; those are the stories of addiction; and those are the stories that we want to stop in this Chamber today.

That is why we are keen for the Government to implement as soon as practicable the proposed maximum stake limit of £2 for FOBTs. It is of some concern that in the Budget the timeframe for implementation was to have been delayed to October 2019. We note that some campaigners said it would be possible to implement it in April 2019 and that the Government have acceded to that. That apparent delay was deeply disappointing. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green referred to the amendment with over 100 Members’ names on it. What changed the Government’s opinion was those 100 names from across the Chamber. I am very pleased that we have achieved that change.

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Amendment 16 agreed to.
New Clause 12

REVIEW OF PUBLIC HEALTH EFFECTS OF GAMING PROVISIONS

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the public health effects of the provisions of section 61 of and Schedule 18 to this Act and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—
   (a) the effects of those provisions in reducing the negative public health effects of gambling, and
   (b) the implications for the public finances of the public health effects of—
      (i) those provisions,
      (ii) the operation of the law relating to remote gaming duty and gaming duty if those provisions were not given effect.”—(Ronnie Cowan.)

This new clause would require a review of the public health effects of gaming provisions.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 15

OFFSHORE RECEIPTS IN RESPECT OF INTANGIBLE PROPERTY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:
   That schedule 3 be the Third schedule to the Bill.
   Clause 16 stand part.
   That schedule 4 be the Fourth schedule to the Bill.
   Clause 19 stand part.
   Amendment 19, in clause 20, page 12, line 26, at end insert—

“(8) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, no later than six months after the passing of this Act, lay before the House of Commons a report on how the powers in this section are to be exercised in each of the scenarios in subsection (9).

(9) The scenarios to be considered in the report under subsection (8) are—
   (a) if either of a—
       (i) negotiated withdrawal agreement, or
       (ii) framework for the future relationship with the European Union have been ratified under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act at the time of the United Kingdom ceasing to a member of the European Union, and
   (b) if both of a—
       (i) negotiated withdrawal agreement, or
       (ii) framework for the future relationship with the European Union have been ratified under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act at the time of the United Kingdom ceasing to a member of the European Union.”

Clause 83 stand part.

New clause 5—Impact analyses of the anti-avoidance provisions of this Act—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of—
   (a) section 15 and Schedule 3,
   (b) section 16 and Schedule 4,
   (c) sections 19 and 20,
   (d) section 22 and Schedule 7,
   (e) section 23 and Schedule 8,
   (f) sections 46 and 47, and
   (g) section 83

of this Act in accordance with this section and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—
   (a) the impact of those provisions on child poverty,
   (b) households at different levels of income,
   (c) the impact of those provisions on people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010), and
   (d) the impact of those provisions on different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England.

(3) In this section—
   “parts of the United Kingdom” means—
      (a) England,
      (b) Scotland,
      (c) Wales, and
      (d) Northern Ireland.

   “regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics.”

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out and publish a review of the effects of the tax avoidance provisions of the Bill on households with different levels of income, on child poverty, people with protected characteristics and on a regional basis.

New clause 6—Analysis of effectiveness of provisions on tax avoidance and evasion—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the effectiveness of—
   (a) section 15 and Schedule 3,
(b) section 16 and Schedule 4,
(c) sections 19 and 20,
(d) section 22 and Schedule 7,
(e) section 23 and Schedule 8,
(f) sections 46 and 47, and
(g) section 83

of this Act in accordance with this section and lay a report of
that review before the House of Commons within six months of
the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—
(a) the effects of the provisions in reducing levels of
artificial tax avoidance,
(b) the effects of the provisions in combating tax evasion,
and
(c) estimates of the role of the provisions of this Act in
reducing the tax gap in each tax year from 2019
to 2022.”

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry
out and publish a review of the effectiveness of the provisions of the
Bill in tackling artificial tax avoidance and tax evasion, and in
reducing the tax gap.

New clause 14—Review of effectiveness of provisions
on tax avoidance

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the
effectiveness of the provisions of this Act relating to tax
avoidance and lay a report of that review before the House of
Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) In this section, “the provisions of this Act relating to tax
avoidance” means—
(a) section 15 and Schedule 3,
(b) section 16 and Schedule 4,
(c) sections 19 and 20,
(d) section 22 and Schedule 7,
(e) section 23 and Schedule 8,
(f) sections 46 and 47,
(g) section 83.

(3) A review under this section must consider in particular—
(a) the effects of those provisions in reducing tax
avoidance and evasion,
(b) the effect of those provisions in inducing new tax
avoidance measures unanticipated by the Act, and
(c) estimates of the efficacy of the provisions in reducing
the tax gap in each tax year from 2018-19 to
2026-27.”

This new clause would require a review of the effectiveness of
provisions on tax avoidance.

New clause 15—Report on consultation on certain
provisions of this Act (No. 4)—

“(1) No later than two months after the passing of this Act,
the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before the House of
Commons a report on the consultation undertaken on the
provisions in subsection (2).

(2) Those provisions are—
(a) section 15 and Schedule 3,
(b) section 16 and Schedule 4,
(c) sections 19 and 20,
(d) section 22 and Schedule 7,
(e) section 23 and Schedule 8,
(f) sections 46 and 47,
(g) section 83.

(3) A report under this section must specify in respect of each
provision listed in subsection (2)—
(a) whether a version of the provision was published in
draft,
(b) if so, whether changes were made as a result of
consultation on the draft,
(c) if not, the reasons why the provision was not published
in draft and any consultation which took place on the
proposed provision in the absence of such a draft.”

This amendment would require a report on consultation undertaken
on certain provisions of this Act – alongside new clauses 9, 11 and 13.

4 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): It is a great pleasure, again, to serve under your
chairmanship, Dame Eleanor. The Government have always been clear that while taxes should be low, they
must be paid, and that is exactly what we have delivered. Since 2010, we have secured and protected over £200 billion
by clamping down on tax avoidance, evasion and non-
compliance, and we have reduced the UK’s tax gap to
less than 6%, which is one of the world’s lowest. In fact,
if we were running at the level of the figures achieved
under the last Labour Government in 2005-06, we
would be deprived of sufficient income to employ every
police officer and policewoman in England and Wales, so
bringing in tax most certainly does matter.

We have led the way internationally in this respect,
playing a leading role in the OECD’s base erosion and
profit shifting project, and taking unprecedented action
to secure funding for our vital public services and to
ensure that everyone pays their fair share. It is worth
reflecting on the fact that we do not just collect tax for
the sake of collecting tax, because very few people enjoy
paying tax. We do it for a purpose, which is to keep our
financial affairs in good order and to fund the doctors
and nurses in our national health service, and so on.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does the Minister agree
that we sometimes use tax to alter behaviour—for example,
on tobacco and alcohol—as well as purely for funding?
That is why measures to prevent the evasion of those
duties are so vital to achieving public health gains, in
addition to the obvious points in terms of the Treasury.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. One
thinks, for example, of the sugar levy to improve public
health and to make sure that our young people, in
particular, move towards a healthier diet. Tax can certainly
have an effect in that respect. As my hon. Friend said,
there is also the duty on cigarettes, tobacco, hand-rolling
tobacco, and alcohol to make sure that as well as just
raising revenues, we change behaviour in a way that is
conducive to the public good.

Bob Stewart: My right hon. Friend has not mentioned
fairness in taxation. That is another principle that we
must use for taxation. Fairness implies that the people
who have the least pay the least and that those who can
afford it pay more. I am quite sure that the Government
are fully aware of that point when raising taxation.

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for that important
intervention. He is absolutely right: fairness has to be
the heart and soul of any progressive taxation system,
along with competitiveness—we want to keep rates
down—and the importance of tax being paid, as I have
been elaborating on. On his specific point, we were of
course able to announce in the recent Budget—this
forms part of the Bill—the increase in the personal
allowance, which is now up to £12,500. Bear in mind
that in 2010 the personal allowance was about £6,500.
The personal allowance is, of course, the amount that an individual can receive by way of earnings without those earnings falling due to income tax. Any increase in the personal allowance does indeed have a disproportionately beneficial impact on the lowest-paid in our country. Since 2010, in fact, we have now removed some 4 million people in total from tax altogether.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Whatever the merits or otherwise of increasing the personal allowance, which we support in the Bill, surely the Minister recognises that the gain for every person taken out of the bottom rate of income tax in the personal allowance is worth double to people paying the top rate of income tax. Clearly, if someone is paying the top rate of income tax, every £1 of the personal allowance is a greater saving than at the basic rate.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman says he supports our changes to the personal allowance in the Budget, but that was not reflected on Second Reading, when the Labour party voted to reject our tax measures. Indeed, it has been widely critical of our measures to reduce taxation for some 32 million people up and down the country. He will probably be tired of my rehearsing the very important fact that the wealthiest 1% are paying 28% of income tax—far higher proportion than when Labour was in power, when the figure was 24%.

Jonathan Reynolds: That’s not an answer.

Mel Stride: It might be an answer the hon. Gentleman does not like, but it is most certainly an answer.

Jonathan Reynolds: Is it not a fact that everyone in the Chamber, because they pay the top rate of income tax, will disproportionately benefit from the rise in the personal allowance, because every pound of it will be taken out of income on which we pay that top rate? Clearly, then, the gain to all of us as top rate taxpayers will be greater than for people paying only the bottom rate of income tax.

Mel Stride: As I have already said, not only do the wealthiest in our society pay a very large proportion of all tax, but under this Government we have seen significant increases in the national living wage. It rose by 4.4% last April, and through the Bill—I am proud to say—we are putting on to the statute book an increase next April of 4.9%. That is well in excess of inflation and will help the very people that both our parties are committed, in our different ways, to assisting—although our measures are more practical than those suggested by the Labour party.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the point about the higher rate, it was my experience as an employer that if, say, a member of sales staff paying basic rate tax did very well in a given month, got commission or a bonus and as a result experienced a sudden, sharp increase in their tax that month, it reduced the incentive on them next time. I welcome the changes to the higher rate because of the impact on incentives and therefore on productivity and so on.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes an important general point about taxation. As we know, very high taxation has a number of undesirable impacts, not just on individuals and businesses, but on the economy and, through that, the general tax take and our ability as a society to fund our public services, and one of those impacts is that which he rightly raises: the disincentive to go out and produce and create the wealth upon which we all depend. It is the duty and mission of this Government, generally across the piece, to keep taxes as low as possible.

Since 2010, the Government have introduced more than 100 measures to combat avoidance, evasion and non-compliance, but this alone is not enough. To support these measures, it is vital that HMRC be well funded and well staffed. That is why we have invested an extra £2 billion since 2010 in HMRC and why we have 24,000 members of HMRC staff dedicated to tackling avoidance, evasion and non-compliance.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): How many of those 24,000 members of staff are employed in the HMRC’s wealthy unit, which, as the Minister knows, is the key driver in tackling tax avoidance?

Mel Stride: It is one of the key drivers in tackling tax avoidance and the tax gap—the tax gap occurs not just with individuals but with large corporations and small businesses. I do not have the precise number, but I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with that information. What I can tell him is that, at any one time, about 50% of the largest 200 businesses in the country are under investigation, not necessarily because they have done anything wrong but because, logically, HMRC should be looking particularly carefully at the businesses that are making the largest profits and generating the most.

This investment is paying off. In 2017-18 alone, HMRC secured and protected more than £30 billion in additional tax revenues which otherwise would have gone unpaid. That was a year-on-year increase of £1.4 billion.

We know that some large multinationals have been able to avoid tax by exploiting gaps and mismatches in the international tax system. International leadership was required to address the situation, and that is exactly what the Government have provided. We were at the forefront of the OECD’s base erosion and profit shifting project, which agreed major reforms to the international tax system, and we have taken the lead in implementing these recommendations in domestic legislation. We have also been a strong supporter of the EU anti-tax avoidance directive, and we have helped to shape the common approach that it provides for tackling avoidance in the European Union.

Bob Stewart: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way to me again. For the sake of fairness, we must of course ensure that multinational companies making profits in our country contribute properly to the economy of the country. I hope very much that we can somehow link the profits made in the United Kingdom very closely to the amount of tax that is paid. At the moment some international companies are behaving appallingly in the way in which they handle their tax affairs, and we must sort that out.
Mel Stride: As always, my hon. Friend has made a critical and important point. I took him to be alluding, at least, to the issue of technology businesses—typically, social media businesses, search engines and certain online marketplaces—which, while making substantial profits in our country as a consequence of the interaction of UK users with the digital platforms that they host, are not paying a commensurate level of tax. That led the Chancellor, in the recent Budget, to announce our move towards a digital services tax, whereby we will not be addressing a question of avoidance—it is important to make that point—but will be bringing the international tax regime into the 21st century, so that we can tax profits not just on the basis of where the bricks and mortar may be, where the staff may be, where the intellectual property may reside or where the commercial risks and decisions are being taken, but on the basis of where this particular type of value generation is occurring.

While we have said that we will seek to move forward in a multilateral manner, because we recognise the dangers of double taxation in the event that we move unilaterally, we have made it very clear that we will introduce this measure ourselves as a first mover, or one of the first movers, of the leading countries in the world. We think that it is only right, and we believe that the public feel that it is only right, for these very large businesses to pay an appropriate level of tax.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The Minister says that members of the public would expect that. Can he give some examples of intangible assets, so that people watching the debate at home in Willenhall and Bloxwich can be better informed?

Mel Stride: That is a very good question. In the case of the digital services tax, we are no so much talking about intangible assets, although elements of the Bill—indeed, clauses in this group—relate to ensuring that profits are not artificially shifted as a result of money being moved around in respect of such assets. Here we are talking more about digital platforms, and a particular method of value creation that results from the interaction of UK users with those platforms. However, in terms of intangible assets and intellectual property we might think, for example, of the rights of a particular business based in the UK to carry on business using the branding, know-how and knowledge of a particular piece of intellectual property held in a low or no tax jurisdiction. Any royalties moved from the UK out to that low or no tax jurisdiction will be a form of profit shifting that might be artificial and simply designed to reduce a corporation’s tax bill, which is why we have particular measures in this Bill to address exactly that situation.

4.15 pm

As I have said, this investment is paying off. In 2017-18 alone, we raised an additional £30 billion. When individuals have engaged in tax avoidance, we have brought in a variety of important measures, including to tackle the way in which some people structure their affairs for the purpose of avoiding tax, and to deal with cases of aggressive tax avoidance, such as disguised remuneration, which is being addressed by the loan charge.

Along with effective collection, we are determined that taxes themselves should be as low as possible, and the House will note the reduction in corporation tax and income tax that this Government have delivered. Our increases to the personal allowance took 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax entirely between 2010 and 2015, and a further 1.74 million people will be taken out of tax by 2019-20.

Collectively, our approach and the measures set out in the Bill ensure that taxation in our country is competitive, fair and paid. The Bill shows our continuing commitment to crack down on tax avoidance and evasion wherever we find it.

Chris Stephens: The Minister gave me a written answer yesterday to a parliamentary question about higher rate Scottish taxpayers who register themselves elsewhere in the United Kingdom. He responded by saying that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs holds no data on that. On reflection, does he not think that HMRC should be tackling those trying to avoid tax, specifically the higher rate tax in Scotland?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will, of course, be very aware of the devolution of various elements of our tax system to Scotland, and the issue he identifies is fundamentally driven by the different relative rates of taxation in Scotland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. I would argue that it is incumbent upon the Scottish Government to do as the UK Government do where these matters are reserved, which is to keep taxes as low as possible. I know that Conservative Members representing Scottish constituencies are most keen to deliver that for their constituents.

As we announced at the autumn Budget in 2017, the Government are legislating in this Bill to tax income from intangible property held in low-tax jurisdictions to the extent that it is income that relates to UK sales. Today some large multinationals are able to unfairly reduce their tax bill by arranging to hold their intangible property in offshore entities. That is unacceptable, and we are now going further to level the playing field. Clause 15 requires multinationals that continue to earn intangible property income in low-tax jurisdictions to pay UK income tax on the proportion of that income that relates to UK sales.

Tax avoidance is not limited to large multinationals of course; businesses of all shapes and sizes attempt to unfairly shift UK profits to jurisdictions where they expect to pay less tax or perhaps no tax at all, so clause 16 introduces carefully targeted anti-avoidance rules to prevent these UK businesses from avoiding UK tax by shifting their profits to lower-tax jurisdictions. The clause targets contrived arrangements that, in broad terms, aim to avoid tax by transferring the profits of a UK’s business offshore in a way that would not be agreed between independent parties.

James Cartlidge: I very much agree with my right hon. Friend on this point. Is it not also true that our small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly those that are currently struggling, perhaps including high street businesses, do not have a cat in hell’s chance of running such schemes? They do not hide their profits and they do not mix and match around territories, so we need a level playing field.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The tax avoidance activities that I am describing are way beyond the reach of many businesses of a certain size.
up and down the country. Thinking particularly of our high street businesses, we have a duty to ensure that fixed costs in the form of taxes represented by business rates are reduced to the extent that they can be, and the Chancellor was able to announce a 30% reduction in business rates for those smaller retailers that typically populate our high streets. That was an extremely important move as we work, through our future high streets fund and other approaches, to enable our high streets to transition and become more vibrant and successful places.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The Minister is talking about business rates. As a result of the Government’s action, Scotland should receive about £43 million in additional Barnettised revenues. What work will he be doing with the devolved Administration to ensure that that will help high streets in Scotland as much as the Government are helping high streets elsewhere in the UK?

Mel Stride: As a UK Government, we are always happy, and indeed keen, to work co-operatively with the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, as my hon. Friend suggests. Ultimately, however, these will be decisions for the Scottish Government to make. It will be for them to decide how to spend the revenues that will come through by way of additional funding via the Barnett formula. I can only suggest once again—I think this echoes my hon. Friend’s thoughts—that the best way forward is to keep taxes down and, in the case of Scotland, to have a country that is known for low taxation, rather than gaining a reputation for higher taxation.

Clauses 46 and 47 address the use of contrived arrangements that seek to avoid stamp duty on shares. The Government are aware that some corporate groups are transferring shares to connected companies for an artificially low consideration. The clauses create a targeted marketed value rule for transfers of listed shares to connected companies. This rule will prevent the use of artificially low consideration by charging stamp taxes on shares on the higher of the market value of, or the sum paid for, the shares transferred.

The Bill also re-emphasises our commitment to leading the way in implementing internationally agreed initiatives to combat tax avoidance. Clauses 19, 20 and 23 make changes to the UK’s rules on controlled foreign companies, hybrid mismatches and corporation tax exit charges to ensure that they comply with the EU’s anti-tax avoidance directive. The UK is a strong supporter of the objectives of the directive, as it will ensure that member states take a common approach to tackling tax avoidance. The UK’s rules are already comprehensive, and they already meet or exceed most of the requirements set out by the directive, but some limited changes are needed to ensure that we are fully compliant in all areas.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): On a point of clarity, the Minister has said that stamp duty on shares will be charged at either the market rate or the actual rate, whichever is higher. Will he confirm that shares will still be able to be sold below the market rate so long as the tax is paid on a marked market basis? Is that correct?

Mel Stride: The Bill will ensure that businesses that typically trade in and acquire shares pay the correct level of stamp duty on those shares, rather than paying a certain market rate having transferred the shares, perhaps internally to another company in the same group, in return for shares from that other company that had been valued at a lower level compared with the original purchase price of the original shares. By doing that, some companies have been exploiting a loophole and paying less stamp duty than they would otherwise have done. In case the hon. Gentleman is wondering, the distinction between the two clauses relating to this matter is that one relates to paper shares and the other to the electronic trading of shares in that manner.

Amendment 19 would provide for a review of the changes required to the controlled foreign company rules, which protect against the artificial diversion of profits from UK companies to low-tax jurisdictions, including with regard to the impact of a no-deal scenario. While the Government always keep the general tax system under review, a specific review of those provisions would be disproportionate. They are minor changes to ensure that the UK’s anti-avoidance rules on controlled foreign companies are fully aligned with the direction with which the UK agreed during negotiations on the anti-tax avoidance directive, and there is no need for a review.

Clause 83 enables the introduction of new international rules requiring tax advisers to report to HMRC certain cross-border arrangements that could be used to avoid or evade tax. That information will allow HMRC to build up the full picture of such arrangements. Following a consultation next year, the Government will introduce secondary legislation containing further details of the rules. We have played a leading role in designing that approach, which forms part of our ongoing work to champion international tax transparency and to tackle offshore tax avoidance and evasion.

Amendment 23 would require the Government to publish a report on how clause 83 will be exercised under various EU exit scenarios before making the proposed regulations. However, the Government are already committed to a formal consultation on the proposed regulations, and all practical aspects of implementing the regulations and EU exit will be taken into consideration as part of that consultation.

As we depart from the EU, we must continue to honour existing commitments. That is why we are allowing capital gains tax in respect of exit charges to be paid in instalments. Exit charges can arise on unrealised capital gains when a trust ceases to be UK resident, or if a non-resident individual either ceases to trade through a UK branch or agency or moves trading assets abroad. Exit charges ensure that tax cannot be avoided by moving assets overseas. Clause 22 retains those rules. However, when such entities choose to move their place of residence within the European economic area, they will now be given the option to defer the payment of tax, paying in six equal annual instalments with interest, which will not reduce the amount of tax that is due.

Opposition amendments 3 and 4 would require the beneficiary of a trust that pays capital gains tax on an instalment basis to provide information about the source of its income in a public register. That requirement is disproportionate and unnecessary. Migrating trusts seeking to use the scheme will have paid UK tax, so their
income sources will have been declared to HMRC. Information about the nature of the trust’s assets will also be held on the trust register, which applies to trusts with a UK tax liability and is available to law enforcement agencies. Consequently, there is no need for further reporting.

New clause 5 would require the Government to carry out a review of the equality impact of some of the Bill’s anti-avoidance provisions. The tax information and impact notes published alongside the measures already set out the impact of anti-avoidance measures in the Bill on those sharing protected characteristics. In general, they show that HMRC does not expect the measures to have notably different impacts on people according to their protected characteristics.

New clauses 6 and 14 would require the Government to publish a review of the effectiveness of the Bill’s provisions to tackle tax avoidance and tax evasion, and to reduce the tax gap. Such a review is unnecessary. The Government keep all taxes under review and will continue to measure and publish annual statistics on the tax gap. I have little doubt that those statistics will continue to show that the tax gap is lower than at any time under the previous Labour Government.

New clause 15 would require the Government to publish a report on the consultation that we have undertaken on some of the measures in the Bill. The Government are committed to creating a more predictable and stable tax system. Our move to a single fiscal event timetable are committed to creating a more predictable and stable tax system. Our move to a single fiscal event timetable.

Kevin Foster: This is about scrutiny.

Anneliese Dodds: Indeed. When we are unable to table amendments on provisions within a Budget, it is a severe restriction on the House’s ability appropriately to challenge the Government’s policies. In any case, if the Government can muster backing for their approach to prevent a change in policy, they can do so.

Kevin Foster: If the Labour party is so committed to scrutiny of this Bill, how come the Opposition Benches are virtually empty? The hon. Lady says that it is because Labour Members cannot table amendments, but they could come along and make speeches.

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Gentleman has made the point for himself. It is precisely because we do not have the ability to table meaningful amendments that we are in this position. I am sure that he is aware that, when it was possible for Labour Members, often with other Members, to table meaningful amendments to Finance Bills, there was a huge amount of participation, such as when amendments were tabled on country-by-country reporting. Sadly, despite those amendments, we have not yet seen the change in Government policy that we would have liked. When the House is given the power, we exercise it; when we are not given the power, we are unable to exercise it.

As “Erskine May” sets out very clearly, in these circumstances, the only permissible amendments are “strictly limited to what is authorized by the specific resolutions on which the bill is founded.”

Because of those restrictions, the Opposition cannot expand the scope of measures against tax avoidance and evasion beyond the very limited scope presented in the Bill.

There is a whole host of areas in which the Government should be taking action but where the Bill is completely silent. There has been no new approach from the Conservative Government on the verification of information supplied by companies when they register, despite widespread evidence of tax avoidance and money laundering being facilitated through the registration of fake companies via Companies House.

On shell companies, the Government have provided only a consultation on partnerships rather than action, and they have failed to use to any great extent their legal ability to impose fines on partnerships that fail to provide beneficial ownership information. Despite their consultation on a new offence of failure to prevent economic crime finishing more than a year ago, we still appear to have no more progress on that. Although our Government now have, as I mentioned, the legal means
to require country-by-country reporting wholesale, following
that amendment to a Finance Bill two years ago, when
we were able properly to amend the Bill, they have
refused to take up that option.

Despite this catalogue of failure, the Government
continue to talk up their record. We saw this elevated to
the level of farce last night, when Conservative central
office—I assume—released a graphic on Facebook with
the laughable claim that Labour had just voted against
cracking down on tax avoidance. Labour has consistently
advocated much stronger measures on tax avoidance
than this Government have done. Indeed, the weakness
of measures in the Bill is one of many reasons why we
oppose it. The graphic included a background of palm
trees, presumably a bizarre reference to our overseas
territories. It is bizarre, given the woeful lack of action
by our Government in this regard.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Would the shadow
Minister like to join me in congratulating the Government
on having reduced the tax gap from 8% under the last
Labour Government to 6% today, which is the lowest
level in the developed world?

Anneliese Dodds: I will go on to talk about the
assumptions that the Government currently use to calculate
that tax gap, and the hon. Gentleman will learn that
their claims to have massively reduced the amount of
tax avoidance through that measure are potentially
questionable, to say the least. Perhaps after we have had
that discussion, we will see whether he still holds to that
assessment.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): While we wait for the
hon. Lady to congratulate the Government on closing
the tax gap, will she recognise that many of the steps
taken in the Bill have to be taken in a way that is
mindful of how international tax systems work and
how we need to ensure that the tax we are gathering
measures suggest that much larger amounts of tax are
being avoided and, indeed, that larger sums could be
rectified if tax evasion was dealt with. Yet again, we
hear this comment about the cut to the corporation tax
rate. I am sorry to sound like a stuck record, but I ha ve
found the Government asserting that £55 billion a year;
will not illuminate us with the fact that his Government’s
costs of profit shifting and that it starts from the assumption that companies
are declaring the correct amount of tax, which surely
does not lead to companies leaving the UK and trading
and Customs has found errors or evidence of a voidance
assessed on the basis of whether Her Majesty’ s Revenue
begs the question. The tax gap for this Government is
is the lowest level in the developed world?

Anneliese Dodds: I will go on to talk about the
assumptions that the Government currently use to calculate
that tax gap, and the hon. Gentleman will learn that
their claims to have massively reduced the amount of
tax avoidance through that measure are potentially
questionable, to say the least. Perhaps after we have had
that discussion, we will see whether he still holds to that
assessment.

Anneliese Dodds: Of course we need a business-friendly
tax environment, but we should also recognise, just as I
find when I talk to many international businesses, as I
do in my shadow ministerial position, that the vast
majority of businesses want to be compliant. Sadly, a
small number of firms are not necessarily complying
with the letter of the law and some are also not complying
with the spirit of the law. That is leading to a situation
where our public services are starved of the funding we
need, which has a huge impact on business, as I am sure
the hon. Gentleman is aware through his discussions
with businesses in his constituency.

Let me return to the matter of overseas territories,
which strangely appear to be referred to in pictorial
form in material released by Conservative central office.
This Government were forced kicking and screaming by
this House to require our overseas territories to produce
public registers of beneficial ownership, but I understand
that all that has happened since the vote that forced that
change in policy is one conference call, leading to a
vague commitment to convene a technical working
group—but it is not going to meet until 2019. So we
have had many months since that vote in this House but
almost no action. In addition, rather than fulfil the
commitments the Opposition were given that our
Government would work with Crown dependencies towards
transparency, tax treaties were presented to this House
last week that included no such provisions whatsoever.

The Minister has, as ever, opined that his Government
have reduced the tax gap, and indeed other Members
have just referred to that. I am sure, however, that he
will not illuminate us with the fact that his Government’s
tax gap measure excludes the costs of profit shifting
and that it starts from the assumption that companies
declaring the direct amount of tax, which surely
bears the question. The tax gap for this Government is
assessed on the basis of whether Her Majesty’s Revenue
and Customs has found errors or evidence of avoidance
on tax returns, an approach that has rightly been criticised
by the Public Accounts Committee, given that it leads
to a situation where much of the tax lost through
avoidance simply does not count as part of the tax gap.
The Government’s tax gap does not appear to include
cases of avoidance or evasion that do not fall under
existing legislation, so it fails to capture numerous loopholes
that continue to be exploited simply because they are
exactly that: loopholes.

Chris Philp: Did I detect a sigh when the hon. Lady
gave way? She is questioning the basis of the tax gap as
a sign of progress, so let me try a different statistic that
she might feel better about. The amount of corporation
tax collected has gone up from £35 billion a year to
£55 billion a year; is that not evidence that these tax-raising
measures are effective?

Anneliese Dodds: I am always delighted to hear from
the hon. Gentleman, but when he talks about the tax-gap
measurement, he is talking about his Government’s
tax-gap measurement, not one that is universally accepted.
In fact, it is quite the opposite, and many alternative
measures suggest that much larger amounts of tax are
being avoided and, indeed, that larger sums could be
rectified if tax evasion was dealt with. Yet again, we
hear this comment about the cut to the corporation tax
rate. I am sorry to sound like a stuck record, but I have
to remind the hon. Gentleman that every expert
commentator on this matter has intimated that the rise
in the corporation tax take is not because of the cut to
the rate and that, in fact, had the rate not been cut,
more revenue would have accrued to the Treasury. As I
will go on to discuss, that revenue could have been used

to support public services and social security for our
constituents.

James Cartlidge rose—

Julian Knight rose—

Anneliese Dodds: My goodness—who to choose!

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady will be sighing a bit
more when I point this one out. It is very kind of her to
give way. She said that the tax take has not gone up
because of the rate cut, and she is absolutely right:
above all, the reason the tax take has gone up is that the
economy has been growing very strongly.

Anneliese Dodds: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman
views as a badge of pride the recent growth statistics. I
would never talk down the British economy—it has a
huge amount of promise—but I am deeply concerned
about the fact that our growth statistics, particularly for the future, have been revised down. For next year and the following year, I believe that they are 1.6% and 1.4%, so they have been revised down. In the past, in normal times, we would have viewed growth statistics of that kind as a failure. Of course I am pleased that our economy is finally growing again—it was, of course, growing when Labour left office—but I am none the less deeply disappointed that we are not reaching the same levels of growth as many of our competitor countries.

Several hon. Members rose—

Anneliese Dodds: With the Committee’s permission, I shall continue with my comments.

We need a far more serious and engaged approach to countering tax avoidance and evasion. Our amendments are an attempt to provide that—at least within the scope of the limited measures in the Bill. First, with amendments 3 and 4, we are calling for public registers for beneficiaries of trusts who have relocated or plan to relocate to other EEA countries and who seek to defer their corporation tax exit charges, or those relating to capital gains tax, through a payment plan, as the Minister intimated. The Government’s action in this policy area has been necessitated by recent decisions of the European Court of Justice, which considered the compatibility of member state exit charges with article 49 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union.

As the Minister intimated, the measures in the Bill will enable those who adopt an exit charge payment plan to pay in six equal instalments, albeit with interest. Given that this approach is necessitated by EU law and applies to individuals and trustees who move to another EU or EEA country, and given that some Government Members sadly flirt recklessly with the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, I would have expected the Government to explain what might happen in this policy area as our relationship with the EU changes. That was not the case in respect of the information about these measures that we were given: nor does anything in the Bill lead us in the relationship with the EU to provide, which is the information about tax incidence. That assessment is necessary because of the continuing leakage from our tax system owing to a voidance as well as evasion. Failure to deal with a voidance has put pressure on the rest of the tax system, which, as I have just mentioned, has been exacerbated by unnecessary tax cuts to the very best-off people and to profitable corporations. As many independent observers have noted, these tax cuts have tended to benefit the very best-off people and often men rather than women, while £4 out of every £5 cut from Government budgets has fallen on women’s shoulders. The Women’s Budget Group has shown how, out of all household types, lone mothers have been the hardest hit by cuts to services and tax and benefit changes, followed by lone fathers and single female pensioners. Among lone mothers, it is black and minority ethnic women who have lost the most.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Is the hon. Lady suggesting that we should have differential tax rates for men, women and different ethnic groups?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful for the intervention, because it enables me to make the answer clear. Absolutely not. We are asking for something very simple. Sadly, it is something that this Government have not been willing to provide, which is the information about tax incidence. We do not have that information to the extent that the House needs. The process of analysis has been left to...
bodies such as the Women's Budget Group and the Child Poverty Action Group. They have to crunch the data. That is an activity that should be carried out by Government, so that we as Members are able appropriately to scrutinise their policy and practice. We do not have that information at the moment.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady is being very generous in giving way. As a rejoinder and as a follow-up to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), that is not the point he was making. He is saying that the implication is that, to change the system, we would need to have discriminatory tax policies to effect a different impact. We cannot just assess it; for it to be different in practice, the measures, by definition, would also have to be discriminatory.

Anneliese Dodds: I fear that the hon. Gentleman has yet again made the point for himself. This Government's approach to taxation so far has affected different groups disproportionately. We can call that discrimination, unequal impact or whatever we like. The fact is that we found out about that not through Government figures, but due to analysis conducted by other bodies. We had a lengthy debate about this during the last Finance Bill, and I am very happy to run through all the arguments again. I suggest, however, that it might be easier for him to read analysis by those expert bodies, which will make the point more eloquently than I could.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The hon. Lady is extremely generous in giving way. I wonder whether she will accept a point made by a member of one of the groups about which she is speaking—that is, by a woman. Does she accept that there are more women in work now due to this Government's measures, making women better off compared with the legacy left by her party's Government, of which I accept she was not a member?

Anneliese Dodds: I appreciate the hon. Lady's comments, but is she aware that under her party's Government, moving into work is sadly no longer the route out of poverty for huge numbers of working women? For example, two thirds of children living in poverty are in working households. Previously, someone who could obtain a job with enough hours would be able to climb out of poverty. That is no longer the case in the UK. Furthermore, as I just mentioned, those who have analysed the impact of tax and benefit changes on different genders have shown very clearly—it is simple to look at the statistics—that £4 out of every £5 cut by this Government have been cut from the pockets of women and from the services that women use.

Rachel Maclean indicated dissent.

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Lady can shake her head at me, but she should shake her head at the Women's Budget Group, which has shown this very clearly.

Chris Stephens: On seriously tackling the tax gap and the lack of analysis that the hon. Lady is identifying, could one of the reasons possibly be the meat cleaver that was taken to the HMRC office network, meaning that there is now a lack of local knowledge? Also, should not the Government employ as many people to tackle tax avoidance as they do for Department for Work and Pensions social security fraud?

Anneliese Dodds: I know that the hon. Gentleman has worked on the issue of cuts to HMRC's capacity, as have many Members across the House. I will return to that important issue soon, because sadly the reality does not reflect the rather rosy picture that we were provided with by the Minister on that subject.

I return to the distributional impact of this Government's tax measures. We had an interesting discussion about fairness following some comments by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is no longer in his place. The Minister intimated that he was in favour of a fair tax system and said that the wealthiest people pay a large proportion of all tax. He is absolutely right: the wealthiest people do pay a large proportion of income tax. That is because of how wealthy they are. However, if we look at the impact of the tax system on different income groups, we find—I should not say "we" because it is the Office for National Statistics that has discovered this—that the best-off 10% of people pay less of their income in tax than the worst-off 10%. I note that the Conservatives did not contest this statistic when it was mentioned in the House yesterday. Surely that is a ringing indictment of their approach to taxation.

Chris Philp: I am delighted that the shadow Minister has given way once again, without sighing this time. The poorest in society are not in tax at all thanks to the increase in the threshold. The richest 1% do indeed pay 28% of tax, but they only earn about 12% of all income, so she will see that the amount of tax they pay is a great deal higher than their share of income.

Anneliese Dodds: It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Gentleman, who is always a very friendly face. Sadly, however—I feel bad doing this—I do have to correct him on two of the points that he mentioned. He stated that the poorest people will not pay any tax at all. That is simply not the case. Of course, they will pay—

[Interruption.] No, no—he said “any tax”. Let us be clear: of course, large numbers of very badly off people pay a lot of value added tax, which is a regressive tax, even with the exemptions that apply to it.

In addition to that, increasing numbers of low-income people across this country are now paying council tax, many of them for the first time, because of the swingeing cuts that the hon. Gentleman's Government have delivered to local authorities' budgets for council tax relief. So we now have very large numbers of very-low-income people being taken to court because they are unable to pay their council tax. That situation is novel in our country but some might say it approximates things that happened back in the 1980s, which I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is too young to remember but which the history books have certainly not forgotten.

We also need a thorough understanding of how the failure to tackle tax avoidance affects our different regions, given that austerity's impact on incomes has been strongest in areas that were already struggling economically. We need a thorough impact assessment of the impact that the failure to deal with tax avoidance is having on child poverty. Yesterday Ministers tried to
deflect attention from their record on poverty by using only figures on absolute poverty. They never speak about the measure that is instead used by most academics and experts—relative poverty—because they know that more children are now living in relative poverty under their watch: almost a third of children, in fact. The problem is such that the chief executive of the Child Poverty Action Group has described the Conservative Government as being “in denial” on child poverty.

I will explain why we need to look at relative poverty. We should not look simply at whether people are destitute, as measured by absolute poverty, even though, sadly, many are having to resort to food banks for bare necessities; we also need to look at what people’s incomes are in relation to the living standards that everyone else enjoys. That is why the concept of relative poverty measures whether people are poor in relation to median-income people. Relative poverty matters because it shows whether people can afford to live a decent life.

Kevin Foster: That is what absolute poverty measures.

Anneliese Dodds: No, it does not. Absolute poverty measures whether people can afford the bare necessities of life. To be able to participate in society—in their communities—they cannot fall so massively behind the median income. We are talking about families whose children cannot go to birthday parties for their friends because they cannot afford a card and a present. For me, that is a failure of our society, and it is to do with relative poverty, not absolute poverty. Over 4 million children in this country are classified as living in relative poverty, and that number is rising, not diminishing.


Bim Afolami: Does the hon. Lady accept that, when we are dealing with the complexity of international tax treaties, judicial precedent and the rule of law, and given that those treaties and lots of judicial precedent were established at a time when we did not have multinationals in the way we do now, it is only prudent to consult properly before we put measures in place? Does she also accept that this Government have been a leader, according to the OECD and the IMF, in dealing with the problem that she outlines, and that she is not being fair at all?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. However, I am sorry to point out that he is slightly behind the times when it comes to the operation of tax treaties. Those are now multilateral, following the development of the OECD’s multilateral instrument, which aims to amend tax treaties for all signatories, including the UK, in a thorough manner.

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again. The whole point is that this is all a work in progress, as she would accept.

Anneliese Dodds: That appears to be a slightly different point from the one the hon. Gentleman was making a moment ago. None the less, I agree that this is a work in progress. Sadly, our Government and Conservative Members in other jurisdictions have not always been promoting that process. I gently remind him that his colleagues in the European Parliament have consistently voted against measures that would increase tax transparency and have consistently not supported attempts to hold inquiries into, for example, the Panama papers and the Luxembourg leaks. I hope that, at some point, they will catch up with the need for more tax transparency and enforcement. Perhaps he could encourage them; that would be enormously helpful.

It is positive to see in this Finance Bill that the Government have adopted some of Labour’s proposed measures in our tax transparency and enforcement programme. They have finally seen the light on giving HMRC back preferred creditor status. They appear to be undertaking some action against umbrella agencies exploiting the employment allowance. They also appear to be looking towards creating an offshore property levy, although it is unclear to me, even following the Minister’s comments, how appropriately that will be targeted, given that it lacks the precision of Labour’s proposed oligarch property levy. But there are few additional measures in the Bill beyond what is already required by either the EU or the OECD, showing an abject lack of ambition and commitment from this Conservative Government.
[Anneliese Dodds]

Underlying all this, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, is the Government’s failure to appropriately staff HMRC to deal with tax avoidance and evasion and their determination to press ahead with its reorganisation, despite evidence that it is haemorrhaging experienced staff. Some additional money has been provided, which the Minister referred to in his speech. However, we still lack clarity on exactly where that money will go. The Government have committed to provide 5,000 additional customs staff. I still do not know where they will go. We are looking at a situation where, due to the regional reorganisation, there will not be a single HMRC hub along any of the south coast or beyond the central belt. Where customs officials will go is very unclear.

In addition, any additional money that is being provided by the Government, or at least much of it, will in any case just backfill what has been sucked out through the recruitment costs necessitated by the need to replace staff who have been lost due to the reorganisation process.

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is painting a very negative picture, which I think is a shame. She should give this Government some credit for the fact that they have collected £71 billion more tax than would have been the case, given the tax regime, under Labour. That is £71 billion that has been collected. We all want to go further, but will she not welcome that money, which has gone into our public services?

Anneliese Dodds: I discussed a few moments ago how many of those measures are in fact disputed. It would be interesting if the hon. Lady could break down that figure. I suspect many of us would not agree that it reflects an accurate representation of the tax lost. In fact, as I mentioned, when profit shifting is taken into account, that figure is likely to be much larger.

I am very positive about the potential of our economy, and the potential of our tax officers, but I think they are being presented with an impossible task. They are closing the offices in Coventry. I do not know about the constituency of the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), but people are having to go a long distance—16 miles to Birmingham—to deal with their tax problems.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We have raised this many times and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) has raised it as well. The Government are reducing the number of tax offices, in actual fact. They are closing the offices in Coventry. I do not know about the constituency of the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), but people are having to go a long distance—16 miles to Birmingham—to deal with their tax problems.

Anneliese Dodds: As always, my hon. Friend has made an important point. We are seeing the loss of many experienced staff in these offices, which is not only a problem for HMRC, but an enormous problem for local economies.

Over the past couple of months, I have visited 10 of the locations where HMRC offices have either already closed or are set to close, and I must say that there is huge concern about the implications for those local areas. They are often ones where it takes a long time to travel to other destinations and where it is impossible to travel to work to the new regional centres. As a result, we are losing much expertise within our Revenue service.

That is reflected in the statistics from surveys of HMRC staff. We see that HMRC staff morale is incredibly low, but we have no recognition of that by the Government or any understanding of the implications of that for the services that HMRC provides. Indeed, as Members have mentioned, that would become even more of a problem if HMRC had to attempt to sort out the customs and VAT chaos that would be caused by a no-deal Brexit.

Our uncertain future relations with the EU are at the root of the penultimate Opposition amendment that I will speak to, amendment 23. The amendment requires a consideration of the implications for cross-border tax information sharing of no deal and of the Government’s withdrawal Bill arrangements. The European Scrutiny Committee asked for

“the Government’s view on the value of continued UK participation in the wider system of exchange of information created by the DAC Directive”—

the directive on administrative co-operation—

“after the post-Brexit transition period ends, and how it will seek to secure the desired level of cooperation when it becomes a third country for the purposes of EU law.”

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who is sitting on the Front Bench again today, sent a letter in response at the end of April. On this point, however, his letter simply said that

“the Government recognises the value of the exchange of information in tackling tax avoidance and evasion and will address procedures for ongoing administrative cooperation, including the exchange of information framework set up”—

under the directive—

“within the scope of the wider EU exit negotiations.”

It is one thing recognising the value of information exchange, but it is quite another ensuring that it will continue. We really need clarity from the Government, not only about administrative co-operation but about other forms of information exchange.

For example, will the Government continue to participate in the code of conduct group, potentially with observer status? I have asked about that repeatedly, but as of yet I have received no answer. Will we participate in the
The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) referred to the need for a level playing field. Surely that applies in spades when it comes to transparency on tax rulings, so I am very disappointed that his Government have not yet provided that transparency. It is not clear how they will share that data with the EU27 in the future.

The Conservatives’ mood music on this issue so far has been worrying. Not only has the Chancellor damaged relations with the EU27 by threatening to turn our country into a tax haven, but his party’s MEPs—[Interruption]—He has. A number of Government Members are claiming, from a sedentary position, that that never happened, but many Opposition Members will recall precisely when he made those kinds of threats. I have talked to many colleagues from different political parties in EU27 countries who viewed those comments—

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anneliese Dodds: I will give way when I have finished my sentence. I am so pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is so excited about participating in this debate. As I have said, I have talked to many politicians in EU27 countries who interpreted those comments—discussing a shift towards a Singapore-style model—as a threat. Of course, often when Government Members talk about a Singapore-style model, they omit to mention the huge amount of social housing, for example, in that nation, and other aspects of its business model. I suspect they have a rather different approach in mind when they talk about it.

Sir Hugo Swire: The hon. Lady, who speaks for the Opposition, said she can specifically say when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made these assertions or claims. When were they made?

Anneliese Dodds: I would be more than happy to look up that reference and send it to the right hon. Gentleman immediately. I regret that he cannot remember his own Chancellor’s words and that he is unaware that there have ever been comments from his Government suggesting that the UK may at some point shift towards a Singapore-style model. I regret that he is unaware of the comments that have so soured our relationship with the EU27, because I know that they have caused enormous problems for us. They have presented a picture of our country as seeking to undermine and undercut tax arrangements in the rest of the EU27. For that reason, it is enormously important that those comments should be counted.

If the right hon. Gentleman believes that his Government will no longer use that threat, I will be very pleased to hear it, and I would suggest that he perhaps has conversations with those members of his Government who have advocated that point of view.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anneliese Dodds: I will not give way, because I fear that the Committee is losing patience with the length of my comments. [Hon. Members: “More!”] It is wonderful to see so much interest in the topic of taxation; I only wish that were always the case.

The Conservatives’ mood music on this issue has been worrying, as I have said. As I have referred to previously, the Conservatives’ MEPs have consistently either voted against or abstained on EU-level measures to promote tax transparency, and the Conservative Government were, sadly, unwilling to meet representatives from the European Parliament’s Panama papers investigative committee when they came to the UK.

Our amendment 23 would force these issues into the open and require a proper consideration by Government of how they could act to ensure proper data sharing, in order to combat tax avoidance and evasion. It is paralleled by our amendment 19, which would require the Government to undertake a review of our controlled foreign companies regime, with particular consideration of how it would be affected in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

The Conservative Government appear to treat countering tax avoidance as a game of whack-a-mole, rather than the long-term strategic approach that is surely required. As a result, we wish to press new clause 5 and amendment 23 to a Division.

In conclusion, the Government have no long-term plan for protecting the revenue on which our public services rely and appear to have no clear idea of how they will co-ordinate, or otherwise, our measures on tax avoidance with the EU27. A different approach is needed and my party stands ready to implement it as soon as we get the chance.

5.15 pm

Kevin Foster: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which is not the first I have ever taken part in on tax avoidance. We have all had some enjoyable banter across the Chamber, but I think it is worth paying tribute to the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) for the sheer number of interventions she was prepared to take when she knew they would be challenging. Not many Front Benchers are happy to do that, so it is worth putting it on record.

I spent two years as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which looked at the details of HMRC’s performance and in particular what work was being done to ensure that the taxes we set by law in this Parliament are collected. We need to be clear about what we are talking about when we talk about tax avoidance. In theory, someone who has an ISA savings account avoids some tax. That is not what we are talking about. What we are talking about is those who seek to use lawful methods, but stretch them to the point of incredulity.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman has just made the absolutely ludicrous and childish suggestion that buying an ISA is engaging in tax avoidance. For the avoidance of doubt, does he believe that HMRC includes ISAs in its calculation of the tax gap?
Kevin Foster: Normally I thank Opposition Members for their interventions, but that really was quite churlish. My point was that when people transfer their money from an ordinary savings account to an ISA they do not pay tax on the income from their savings, so guess what? They avoid a level of income tax. That is something we all think is right. It is how we incentivise saving and how many millions of people in this country save. So yes, tax is avoided but perfectly legitimately. That is not the point I am making, as the hon. Lady full well knows.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend is spot on: an ISA is technically a form of tax avoidance. The point, however, is that what irks our constituents is when international companies and others take advantage of avoidance schemes that may be lawful at the time, but which no normal citizen could in any way take advantage of—unlike an ISA, which is commonly available.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which gets to the point of the debate. Tax avoidance is when people create a very complex legal structure, for example having something offshore and routing it through a shell company. That is what we are targeting. People will look to minimise their tax liability; that is natural. I am talking about when it is clear that fictional legal companies are being created that do pointless activity or pretend to do something that is not being done, or when a value transaction is actually nothing more than just a wooden dollars transaction made with the intention of avoiding stamp duty or a liability. That is the point being made. We could go through the record of the Opposition before 2010 if we really wanted to, but we should focus on the issue itself. Tax havens did not just appear the day David Cameron walked into Downing Street—far from it.

The PAC looked at Google’s affairs. Before I sat on the PAC, I thought that a double Irish might be a drink and that a Dutch sandwich might be something involving Edam cheese. Actually, they were both ways in which corporations sought to avoid tax and route their profits into tax haven jurisdictions where the level of tax paid versus the GDP was rather suspicious or into jurisdictions, particularly Bermuda, where the amount being declared versus what the real economic activity was likely to be was rather suspicious. I will talk more about intangible property areas in a minute. The Dutch sandwich was an idea created by the Dutch Government to try to get IT firms to invest in the Netherlands. That was perfectly reasonable as something that they would look to do, but courtesy of some loopholes, people were allowed to transfer profits through from activity elsewhere. The result was not investment and jobs in the Netherlands, but significant levels of tax avoidance.

In the Public Accounts Committee, we used to be very keen on hearing more details about and having more of a focus in HMRC on where genuine tax evasion had taken place—where people had lied and hidden assets in offshore jurisdictions and not declared them. That is not about people using some clever trick; they had just lied to evade tax. It was vital that penalties followed on from that once it was discovered. If people constantly avoided prosecution, it almost sent a message that if someone is caught, they can just pay up. However, I am conscious that we are not discussing that area of the law today.

It was interesting to go through the House of Commons Library report on today’s debate and particularly to look at some statistics on where the tax gap comes from. The report mentions that in 2016-17, small businesses were part of the tax gap. However, there were also large businesses, and criminals were in third place—depriving us of billions of pounds of taxation revenue—which is why I welcome some of the measures that the Government are looking to bring in as part of the Bill.

For me, the big one is the provisions on intangible property. Clause 15 looks really simple—it is two lines—but schedule 3, which is the meat of the proposal, really starts to get into some of the detail. How the provision is enforced and how it works will be interesting, but I welcome the fact that we are moving to bring it in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) said, it is worth making a point about what intangible properties we are talking about. We are certainly talking about things such as adverts on Facebook and adverts on a search engine being pushed to the top, when someone searches for a particular brand or product. In the debate on the previous of group on amendments, there was an example where someone looking for help with gambling found that—guess what?—“How to help you gamble” was boosted to the top of a search engine’s results, because a particular company had paid for that to happen. That is the type of intangible asset that we will look to target.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend has considerable expertise in this area and I welcome him updating the House. He mentioned some unintended and wholly undesirable consequences of this type of intangible property. Will he enlighten us on whether there are also some beneficial aspects of intangible property, given that the UK is a centre for tech creativity and dynamism and that these are the industries of the future?

Kevin Foster: That is what we have to balance in considering this new tax, because we do not want to shut down the entrepreneurial spirit in many companies and see such provision affecting those who are looking to set out for the first time to get a business going and perhaps to do something that changes the marketplace and really makes a difference. Some of the largest tech companies literally grew out of someone’s garage 10 or 20 years ago. Twitter did not exist when I joined the Conservative party. Facebook did not exist when I first stood for a local council back in 2002. We can see the way that those companies have grown and exploded. We do not want to set up a tax that knocks back genuine entrepreneurialism, but we also have to have a debate about how we ensure that there is a level and fair basis of taxation.

Reference was made earlier to high streets. The point is that a small shop in the centre of a town is paying business rates, collecting VAT, paying its staff and paying corporation tax, and we have to get to a point at which economic activities are fairly taxed. If a large online platform is taking millions of pounds in revenue and paying next to nothing, that is when the annoyance comes and there is a sense of unfairness.

We must have a mature debate on the future of tax in the online space, where activity is much more moveable. My hon. Friend was right to allude to that. These industries can shift much more easily than those that
need a physical presence to trade and reach out to customers. A digital service company could be based in New Zealand, and we could all be using its services today from this building via smartphones, tablets or a standard internet link, in a way that would have been unimaginable 30 years ago.

We have to distinguish between genuine activity—for example, paying a company in New Zealand for a website design service—and a fake transaction or transfer of profits, where no one did anything other than raise an invoice in a convenient jurisdiction, into which the money was paid, even though all the economic activity was done elsewhere, the reason being there was an opportunity to avoid a layer of taxation. In such cases, one might see structures set up that link the corporate shell in that jurisdiction to another jurisdiction that is a tax haven or a place with a very low rate of taxation. The Dutch sandwich, which I mentioned earlier, started out as a good idea to encourage tech investment and ended up as a way to reroute profits and, when combined with the so-called double Irish, as a way of strongly minimising taxation liabilities.

Sir Hugo Swire: My hon. Friend is making some extremely good points with which I agree, but it is not only online companies such as Amazon that we need to work out how best to tax, but others, such as offshore gambling companies, that retain huge revenues generated by doing things in this country. Is he convinced that the reform of all taxation? It seems to me we are trying to play catch-up but that the world is changing quicker than our ability to tax this changing economy.

Kevin Foster: Yes, it is an interesting one. I suspect that if I dealt with that intervention fully, I would be like the vicar in the church who has 10 minutes to unpack the Holy Trinity in an easy and understandable way—[Interruption.] I appreciate my hon. Friend’s confidence in my abilities.

James Cartlidge: I was waiting patiently for my hon. Friend to get back to what he thought intangible property was. Is he aware that proposed new section 608H(1) in schedule 3 to the Bill states:

“In this Chapter ‘intangible property’ means any property except... tangible property”?

Kevin Foster: No, I am not so familiar with things like that. I appreciate the point that my hon. Friend is making. I am sure he will assist in unpacking the Holy Trinity; perhaps, if not now, then when he has more time. This is a fairly difficult area, and I am not sure that there are any answers here.

Sir Hugo Swire: I am in danger of making one intervention in three—or three interventions in one—but I will deal with the intervention made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and then I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mark Pritchard).

The idea is that something intangible is something that we cannot see and cannot hold, whereas something tangible is something that we can literally have in our hands, such as a phone or the copy of the Bill that I am holding now, or something that we can wear. Something that is intangible can be something that we own and to which we have a right. A classic argument about something intangible once concerned a Star Wars computer game, of all things: if I basely bought lots of things in that game using money, and someone else playing the game then sent their forces, which they had bought, to raid that property, would my property be being stolen? That is an interesting legal argument, although it must be said that some people might have a little too much time on their hands if they can become so involved in a discussion of a Star Wars computer game.

There are things that we own but, of course, there are also our own identities and profiles. You probably do not want me to go too far down this path, Ms Dorries, but we have previously had debates about information that is created online, and a data trail can become an asset that is worth money.

Mark Pritchard: I am in danger of making one intervention in three—or three interventions in one—but I will let me develop the theological point raised by my hon. Friend. Steam, ice and water are, of course, all the same: they are three in one, and one in three. I hope that that clarifies his point.

Kevin Foster: I am very grateful. I am sure that a student of divinity is about to fire off an email to me and my hon. Friend saying, “Actually, I am not quite sure that that is the case,” but it is great to hear my hon. Friend’s explanation of how the “three in one” in the case of water could apply to the Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, a detailed unpacking of the Holy Trinity is not listed for consideration on today’s Order Paper, and I should be talking about anti-avoidance measures—[Interruption.] I am glad to hear that the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) thinks that the former would be more interesting. I am sure that at some point he will accuse me of giving a sermon in this place, although I will probably not be covering that subject at the time.
My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk rightly pointed to the measure in which intangible property was defined. It is also worth while for us to consider some of the exemptions, and how their working will be monitored by the Treasury. I am conscious that the Minister is not present, but I am sure that those who are currently on the Treasury Bench will note my remarks.

Proposed new section 608J states:

“Section 608A does not apply in relation to a person for a tax year if the total value of the person’s UK sales in that tax year does not exceed £10,000,000.”

How will we make sure that we do not suddenly see lots of taxed persons with £9,999,999.99 who seem to know each other quite well, or at least seem to be engaging in similar activities? I understand that the provision is well intentioned, and I understand the need for a de minimis level so that we target the larger companies that are intended to be dealt with. I also understand—that this takes me back to the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch—that smaller companies should not suddenly be burdened with having to deal with a very large piece of legislation. However, I should like to know how we can ensure that this does not become a way of avoiding tax.

Proposed new section 608L, which is on page 187 of the Bill, is entitled “Exemption where foreign tax at least half of UK tax”. Again, how can we be sure that that taxation provision is genuinely met so that it does not become an avoidance mechanism?

Most of the changes in the Bill are welcome, however. As we leave the European Union, I would expect that we will still seek to co-operate. I do not think any of us would argue that it would make sense for us not to ensure that we share information to prevent the excessive avoidance or evasion of taxation, just as we have sought to work with jurisdictions such as Liechtenstein, which is not in the EU but has a treaty agreement with us on sharing information to prevent tax avoidance. I am also interested in following the consultation on the digital services tax, which will consider how we can introduce it without snuffing out the entrepreneurialism that we wish to see.

I am conscious that I have detained the Committee for about 19 minutes—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] I hear the requests from SNP Members, who are obviously keen to hear a lot more from me, but, sadly, I must disappoint them on this occasion.

This has been a worthwhile debate. Intangible property is a key area for the future, in terms of not just the straight issue of ensuring that one or two large corporations are not avoiding tax we might think that they are due to pay, but opening up the whole debate of how we arrange tax as we move into a digital economy, when we are less likely to have physical things we can put our hands on in respect of taxable activity.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The shadow Minister claimed earlier that our Chancellor has said that he wants to make the UK into a tax haven. For the sake of clarity and for the record, has my hon. Friend ever heard the Chancellor say that?

Kevin Foster: I have certainly heard my right hon. Friend the Chancellor talking about ensuring that Britain has competitive tax rates, that Britain is a competitive and good place to do business, and that we have a fair balance between raising taxation to pay for our public services and also ensuring that our tax system encourages rather than stymies economic activity in this country.

We heard earlier about the reactions of the EU27. I would point to the Republic of Ireland, which has a lower corporation tax rate than us. If we were to move towards the Republic of Ireland’s rate, it would be somewhat strange for it to say, “How dare you copy us.” This is not about encouraging a tax competition. States in Europe, whether they are inside or outside the EU, will look to provide the conditions for growth in their countries, and it is absolutely right that that is what the Chancellor and Treasury team in this country are looking to do. I certainly praise them for that. This is not about becoming a tax haven, although we might reflect on the fact that, judging by the actions of the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government, they are trying to turn England into a tax haven by shoving up tax rates in Scotland.

With that, I will draw my remarks to a close. I welcome what I see in this Budget. I do not think that the Opposition amendments and new clauses are necessary, for the reasons the Minister outlined at the Dispatch Box. This welcome Bill will bring in more tax, deal with avoidance and, at the same time, help to push our economy forward.

Alison Thewliss: The renowned Nobel laureate in economics Joseph Stiglitz has said that what we measure shapes what we strive to pursue. I tabled new clauses 14 and 15, in my name and the names of my hon. colleagues, to ensure that we are effectively striving to pursue the reduction in the tax gap and to consult fully on the provisions of this Bill. I support very much what the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said and support her new clause 5 and amendment 23. She made some excellent points, most of which I fully agree with and endorse. I will not repeat what she said, however, as she made her points very clearly; she did a fantastic job in putting across the Labour party’s view.

It was bizarre to watch Government Back Benchers tie themselves in knots yesterday in opposing new clause 7, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), in relation to entrepreneur’s relief. If the UK Government are confident that their policies are effective, they must not be afraid to review them. Indeed, reviewing them is all we can do under this Bill; as the hon. Member for Oxford East said, we are limited in what we can do here. So we do propose a review on that.

Likewise on the provisions on tax avoidance, we must gauge our progress by continually measuring the value and effectiveness of those policies. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) mentioned the Dutch sandwich. I am sure that was sensible when proposed and I am sure that the Dutch Government then looked at it and decided that actually it was not working. They then will have reviewed the policy and looked at the detail and clamped down on that loophole; I am sure they must have done that as otherwise it would still be an issue. Likewise, this Government should do better at reviewing their policies, testing them, seeing how effective they are and making changes as a result.

Our proposal is in the spirit of achieving better, more robust policies in the future. We should also look to the world to see where the best policies are and see what we
can do to adapt them, and we should collaborate with our near-neighbours in Europe, particularly to make sure we are not allowing companies to move around at will seeking the best policies to save money, rather than paying the taxes that they ought to.

There are many reasons why HMRC does not always collect the tax that it ought to be paid, whether through criminal activity, through evasion or avoidance or just through human error, and there is much more that can be done to address that. While a greater focus on the non-compliance of corporations is welcome, there is still ample opportunity to avoid paying into the system, and we need to look at that very seriously.

The SNP has long argued that the tax system is unnecessarily cumbersome and complicated. There are layers and layers of regulations and exemptions, which lead to loopholes appearing. The system seems to get more complex every year when we look at the Finance Bill, and there also appear to be armies of tax avoidance specialists seeking to exploit whatever gaps they can find.

Chris Stephens: Was my hon. Friend not astonished when the Minister admitted that no data is held on any of the higher-rate Scottish taxpayers who are registering themselves elsewhere in the UK, as peddled and promoted by the Scottish Tories last week?

Alison Thewliss: That is indeed astonishing, and if it is a problem, the Government ought to be looking at it. People living in Scotland should pay the appropriate amount of tax, because that is the price we pay for living in a civilised society. That is what the Minister said in his speech earlier. We also have to look at what we get for our taxes in Scotland. We get a better, fairer society, which is good for us all. All the academics in this field recognise that a fair society is better for us all.

Last year, this Government opposed my amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Bill that would have increased the transparency of Scottish limited partnerships by ensuring that those partnerships had bank accounts. We are still waiting for a response from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the consultation that closed on 23 July this year.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I served on that Bill Committee with my hon. Friend, and the work that she did was excellent. Does she share my concern about the damage being done to Scotland’s reputation by Scottish limited partnerships? The partnerships are nothing to do with the Scottish Government, they have not been legislated for in Scotland and we have no power over them there, but they are doing serious damage to Scotland’s reputation internationally, and the UK Government need to act.

Alison Thewliss: This Government absolutely do need to act on this issue. It cannot be right that something we have no control over becomes a noose around our neck when it comes to our reputation internationally. I expect this Government to come forward with something on this soon, because their not doing so allows this to continue to happen. The Herald, whose journalist David Leask has been a constant campaigner on this issue, has reported that “in the year to March 2016, 95% of SLPs were set up by offshore tax havens.”

That ought to ring alarm bells for this Government, given the likely sums of money involved in these tax havens. I have tabled more parliamentary questions on this today, but the last time I checked, no fines had been issued to those SLPs that have not yet registered a person of significant control. Even pursuing those fines against SLPs could have brought large sums of money into the strapped Treasury coffers, never mind dealing with the underlying lack of transparency surrounding SLPs.

It is no secret that SLPs are being abused to carry out crimes abroad and launder money and that the anonymity they provide enables all this, but this Government are simply not doing enough to stop it. There was some progress after the Salisbury attack, and there was talk of clamping down specifically on Russian dirty money, but we have not yet seen that happen. We need to know what the Government’s plans are, because we cannot allow this to continue. I commend to the Minister the investigation on Uzbekistan by David Leask and Richard Smith, because the sums of money and levels of corruption involved are absolutely hair-raising.

The SNP has put forward many sensible proposals to crack down on tax evasion and avoidance, but they have been rejected by this Government time after time. No action has been taken on enforcing the people of significant control rules governing SLPs. No action has been taken on the alternative investment market loophole that allows families to register homes as business properties, effectively overriding inheritance tax. No action has been taken to make online retailers liable for tax avoidance when they falsely classify their goods as gifts. And no action has been taken to create a legal framework to combat tech firms who avoid corporation tax by registering implausibly low profits in the UK.

Hannah Bardell: On top of all that inaction, does my hon. Friend share my concern about the centralisation of HMRC offices? Highly skilled staff will lose their jobs because of this Government’s centralising agenda. In my constituency, more than 1,000 jobs are being moved from West Lothian to Edinburgh, which will create huge issues.

Alison Thewliss: I agree that that loss of expertise is a huge issue. I have a constituency interest, because many of these centralised offices end up being in Glasgow Central, but this also comes at a significant cost to the taxpayer. It is no secret that city centre office space in Glasgow is expensive, and there would be greater benefits in keeping those services in areas such as the Clyde Gateway, which is also in my constituency but much cheaper, or in Livingston. That would provide better value for money for the taxpayer than having them all in city centre offices.

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She is making some good points about decentralisation. Would the SNP join me in looking at some of the Scottish Government’s new powers? Instead of basing offices in Dundee, offices should be located in more affordable areas, such as Clackmannanshire or Perth and Kinross.

Alison Thewliss: Dundee is affordable. There is a balance—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is not listening, but there is a balance here. We need local
infrastructure, transport and so on to support such things, but there is an argument for doing all that. It used to be UK Government policy to decentralise large office blocks, but they have cut that back over the years, and offices are now disappearing. He can give me no lectures about that. There are countless examples of the UK Government cutting offices. So many jobcentres in the city of Glasgow have been cut that my constituents now have to take two buses just to get to one, and I do not see any Scottish Conservatives standing up for that.

5.45 pm

To get back on to topic, it is time for a root-and-branch review of the UK’s massively over-complicated tax system and to close for good the tax loopholes that the Tories are happy to keep open. As well as making it more difficult to avoid or evade tax, a simplification of the tax system could help those who are inclined to pay but find negotiating the system confusing. By HMRC’s own estimates, more than £6 billion a year is lost through simple errors when completing tax forms. The fact that people are ready and willing to pay tax and have such trouble doing so suggests that the current system is not fit for purpose.

That complexity can even have an impact on people’s immigration status. After making entirely legitimate corrections to tax returns, something which I am sure the Minister would encourage, the highly skilled migrants currently fighting their case with the Home Office—they are outside today for their sixth protest—found that they had been accused of dishonesty and that their applications for leave to remain had been refused. It is a scandal that makes absolutely no sense. As a result of Government policy, there is effectively no incentive for highly skilled migrants to make corrections to their tax returns lest they find themselves falling foul of the Home Office. What kind of system is that? Things are not joined up across the Government.

The Chancellor’s announcement of a digital sales tax will be welcomed by many people, not least the many people in my constituency who have contacted me about it. I am encouraged by the Chancellor’s willingness to take action, but, as always, the devil is in the detail. The Chancellor expects to raise £400 million from this tax, but for companies such as Facebook, which had global revenues last year of £1.27 billion, their share will be no particular hardship. We may be better served focusing efforts to ensure that online giants are declaring the profit they make in the UK. We must ensure that companies such as Facebook declare their full profits. Loopholes still exist that make it relatively straightforward to depress profits in one country to avoid paying tax, and that is still perfectly legal. There are some encouraging noises from the Government, but they fall woefully short of the meaningful, comprehensive action that SNP Members have been calling for.

The powers to tackle avoidance and evasion in Scotland lie here at Westminster. Where the Scottish Government do have limited powers, they have acted to tackle avoidance, introducing a general anti-avoidance rule that goes much further than the UK equivalent UK. They have also taken steps to ensure that companies that have benefited from evasion and avoidance do not benefit from public procurement schemes, which is crucial. If the UK Government are unwilling to close tax loopholes, they should devolve the powers to Scotland and allow us to get on with the job. An independent Scotland would, I am sure, seek to simplify and improve the tax system to the benefit of all those living and doing business in Scotland.

Looking to the future, the UK Government need to ensure that Brexit does not serve as a distraction from international efforts to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. I note that Estonia is clearly leading the charge on anti-money laundering action, with Prime Minister Jüri Ratas joining with the Bank of Estonia’s Ardo Hansson to call for the establishment of a European body to combat money laundering. Estonia has a population of 1.3 million and it is leading the charge here. Where are the UK Government on this? They are too busy arguing with themselves about how many letters they can count to get on with the job of tackling tax evasion and avoidance.

At a time of so much uncertainty in the UK economy, we cannot let the economic challenges that lie ahead prevent us from creating a fairer society when it is possible to do so. Our great fear is that the UK Government will begin a race to the bottom, so desperate will they be to attract funds here. The EU has long been a source of anti-money laundering regulation, and we must ensure that, whatever happens in the next few months, we do not take retrograde steps on the progress that has been made.

The SNP supports action and accountability on this. We need to make sure that all possible measures to review our tax system are taken so we know that the UK Government’s system is effective and doing what it is meant to do and that we close these loopholes, which allow people to get away with not paying the tax that is rightfully due.

Helen Goodman: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on a tour de force. I know she really is on top of this subject, having worked with her on the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. I thought her speech this afternoon was very impressive.

I will speak to new clauses 5 and 6, which stand in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and deal with tax avoidance and evasion. I am sure Members on both sides of the Committee recall what happened on 1 May 2018, when there was a cross-party move, spearheaded by Back Benchers, to introduce public registers in the overseas territories. The Government, in the form of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, conceded that this was a change that should be made. We had tabled an amendment that would have required similar public registers in the Crown dependencies, but the right hon. Gentleman said he would prefer to take a voluntary approach and asked me not to press the amendment. In the spirit of co-operation I agreed not to do so. Today I ask the Government what progress they have made with the Crown dependencies on that voluntary approach. In public, the Crown dependencies are going around saying how delighted they are that the pressure is completely off and how nobody in this House is interested in having similar public registers for the Crown dependencies as for the overseas territories.

That is relevant to this tax debate because the OECD has estimated that, across the OECD countries, the tax lost to the secret jurisdictions is between $100 billion
and $240 billion. An independent researcher, Tax Research LLP, has estimated that this country’s tax loss is £18.5 billion a year, which is a significant sum. I know the Treasury thinks everything is going well, but it is not so flush that it can just wave away £18.5 billion.

I thought I had better follow up with Ministers and ask what they were doing, so about three months later I asked the Foreign Office what discussions it was having with the Crown dependencies. This is the answer I received:

“The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is not responsible for UK engagement with the Crown Dependencies regarding existing beneficial ownership arrangements, and has therefore not had any discussions with the Crown Dependencies on this issue.

The Ministry of Justice is the UK Government Department responsible for the UK’s wider constitutional relationship with those jurisdictions.”

So obviously I asked the Ministry of Justice what it is doing to pursue public registers of beneficial ownership with the Crown dependencies. It said:

“The Crown Dependencies are not part of the UK.”

Okay, even I have latched on to that one. It continued by saying that they are self-governing and that:

“The Ministry of Justice manages the constitutional relationship between the UK and the Crown Dependencies. Ministers and officials routinely discuss a range of matters...but it is not my Department’s role to make specific recommendations”

on company registers of beneficial ownership. It went on to say:

“The Ministry of Justice also liaises with the Home Office as the lead UK Department for arrangements on sharing beneficial ownership information”

Blah-de-blah. Finally, it said:

“The Government intends to use its best endeavours, diplomatically”

—by which is meant, “Let’s hit the ball back over to the Foreign Office”—

“and with international partners, to promote public registers of company beneficial ownership as the global standard.”

That will not do. We were made a promise by Ministers on 1 May. This move would help us significantly to reduce tax avoidance.

I also asked Ministers at Treasury oral questions what their estimate was of the amount of money that would flow in from the changes we had made on the overseas territories—this was the part where we had a consensus. I asked that because I could not see anything in the Red Book on it. The Minister said, “Oh well, this was all pie in the sky.” We have not done any work on it. The Crown Dependencies are not part of the UK.

This is why new clauses 5 and 6 are really sensible. The Government are taking action to clamp down on tax avoidance. My understanding from the figures that have been provided by this new scheme to clamp down on tax avoidance, they will want to know what benefit will be taken by the Government. When they look at this measure, it will rise to £12,500. People in my constituency will be confused about what that means. To help us with the definition of intangible assets, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) referred to the definition of intangible assets, my constituents in Bloxwich and Willenhall will be confused about what that means. To help us with the complexity of it, my constituents will be delighted to tune in to this debate and see that the Government are taking action to clamp down on tax avoidance.

As I say, my constituents might not understand the complexity, but they do understand that a Conservative Government is generally on their side. My understanding is that in 2010 the threshold above which people paid tax was roughly £6,500; now, thanks to the benefits introduced recently by this Government, that threshold will rise to £12,500. People in my constituency will be £1,250 a year better off as a result of the measures taken by the Government. When they look at this debate, they will want to know what benefit will be provided by this new scheme to clamp down on tax avoidance. My understanding from the figures that have
been produced is that in the first year, 2020-21, the Government hope to take £457 million more in tax. My constituents will be pleased about that, of course, but they will be wary, given that the Government have already signalled a direction of travel, saying that they will put that money into things like additional spending on the NHS. My constituents might not understand the complexity of intangible assets, but they will know that, because the Government are clamping down on tax avoidance, they will have greater investment in the NHS.

My constituents will also know that the Government are keeping track of the way people buy houses. For example, there has been an increase in demand for shared ownership properties. People who have bought such properties recently will be delighted that the Government have announced that stamp duty relief for first-time buyers will be extended to those people who buy properties on a shared ownership basis. My constituents are seeing a Government who keep track of changing behaviours in the corporate and personal worlds—of how people live and work and of how corporations operate—and make sure that their approach to the tax system is appropriate in both cases.

Hard-working members of the public know that the Government are doing everything they can to take as little tax off them as possible, allowing people to make choices about how they spend their money, while making sure that they can maximise the tax take from big corporates that operate internationally in a fair and appropriate way. That will make sure that the Government continue to deliver for those people who continue to vote Conservative.

Patricia Gibson: I rise to speak in support of new clauses 14 and 15. The need for improved transparency over UK public finances is urgent and the case is compelling, which is why I was keen to speak on those new clauses. I note the other provisions dealing with tax avoidance that have been put forward and about which much has been said today.

There has been far too little consultation on the Bill with stakeholders, but what we do know is that we desperately need greater transparency over the UK’s public finances. I am deeply disappointed that amendment 24 was not selected, as there are particular issues of transparency around those companies that deliver public buildings at public expense. Particularly those engaged in public-private partnership projects need to be more open. There would have been cross-party support for that amendment, but the SNP was not asked to support it, which is a shame.

PPP projects need to be transparent and more accountable to the public in order to protect the public finances. They are a perfect demonstration of why that accountability and openness are so essential. So I have concerns about what is not in the Bill. We cannot talk in any context about openness in public finances without talking about the private finance initiative, and I believe that there is cross-party support to have that conversation. This was a Tory policy embraced by Labour. Indeed, George Monbiot has called the PFI situation: “A racket, the legacy of 13 years of New Labour appeasement, triangulation and false accounting.”

The scheme was so enthusiastically embraced by the previous Labour Administrations, it was like a grand love affair. Scotland was not just the testing ground for this disaster—the first PFI project in Britain was the Skye bridge project—it also has a far higher proportion of such projects than anywhere else. Writer Gerry Hassan has pointed out: “Scotland has 40% of PFI schools with 8.5% of the population.”

Why is that? Could it be that, like the poll tax, Scotland became the testing ground for the PFI nightmare? It certainly looks that way, although if anybody wants to contradict that, I am quite happy to hear what they have to say.

It is unacceptable that PFI companies often inhabit the shadows. Their tax arrangements need to be sufficiently transparent and open so that we can have proper transparency in our public finances and we can be confident that those being paid very lucrative sums—way over the odds for public buildings—are in turn paying their due in taxes and have financial arrangements that are transparent and open to the public. That is why these new clauses are important and why they need to be included in the Bill.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Is the hon. Lady aware that, in England, PFI schools under the control of local authorities can be taken away from the local authority and forced to academise, but the debt—the liability—stays on the books of the local authority? Does she believe that that is transparent and fair?

Patricia Gibson: It is absolutely not transparent and it is yet another example of how PFI has been nothing short of a disaster. It is our local authorities, our schools and our hospitals that are paying the price.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My hon. Friend, like me, is a teacher by profession and has had to deal with working in a PFI school. Often these schools have been developed by companies that have questionable tax policies and produce a substandard product that parents, pupils and teachers have to deal with working in a PFI school. Often these schools need to be transparent and more accountable to the public in order to protect the public finances. They are a perfect demonstration of why that accountability and openness are so essential. So I have concerns about what is not in the Bill. We cannot talk in any context about openness in public finances without talking about the private finance initiative, and I believe that there is cross-party support to have that conversation. This was a Tory policy embraced by Labour. Indeed, George Monbiot has called the PFI situation: “A racket, the legacy of 13 years of New Labour appeasement, triangulation and false accounting.”

The scheme was so enthusiastically embraced by the previous Labour Administrations, it was like a grand love affair. Scotland was not just the testing ground for
There is no better example of the need for new clauses 14 and 15 than North Ayrshire Council in my constituency. This Labour-run council had a PFI project that was severely flawed and was uncovered by local journalist Campbell Martin. Some have even insisted that criminal activity was involved, since while the council appeared to have two bids for construction projects—their perception of providing genuine competition required by EU procurement rules—in fact, the evidence suggested that one of those bids was from a subsidiary of the other company submitting a bid, so there was actually no competition at all. The Labour council was made aware of this before the contracts were awarded, but awarded them regardless. In the opinion of one ex-detective, the evidence showed “criminality from start to finish.”

Another former officer stated that a common law crime of forgery and uttering should have been pursued. Right there we see the need for more transparency. I would like to see more transparency on the tax arrangements of such companies, as this is very much in one’s interests. Right there, we see the need for more transparency. I for one would like to see more transparency on the tax arrangements of such companies, as this is very much in the interests of the UK’s public finances.

All this information relates to a public-private contract now costing taxpayers over £1 million every month in North Ayrshire. Add to that the schools that are crumbling across cities such as Edinburgh, and we have real questions about these PFI firms. For projects of a capital value of £4 billion in Scotland, we will repay £22 billion, with our schools spending 8% of their budgets on paying off these Labour PFI debts. Can we really allow any lack of transparency around the tax affairs of such companies?

It is absolutely essential that there is more transparency around how UK public finances finance public sector projects. The tax affairs of these companies and their wider financial affairs need to be open to scrutiny because they build or have built our public assets. I urge the Committee to support new clauses 14 and 15.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I want to discuss the clauses in the Bill that seek to tackle tax avoidance and evasion. Combined, these measures will seek to raise billions of pounds for our public services by further clamping down on this serious matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) identified clearly that these measures will raise much needed extra money for our public services.

Rather than raising taxes for businesses, this Government are focusing on making sure that tax liabilities are paid. They have a strong track record of clamping down on those seeking to avoid paying their fair share. This Budget builds on that track record, with no fewer than 21 measures to protect revenue and bring in more tax by tackling fraud, avoidance and unfair outcomes.

On a related point, I very much support the introduction of a new digital services tax, which is not technologically a measure designed to tackle tax avoidance, but which will nevertheless make our tax system more fair and fit for purpose in the digital age. The Chancellor is right to try to find a global solution, but in the meantime this measure is a step in the right direction that will make the tax system fairer for small businesses in high streets in my constituency in the Scottish borders that are struggling to compete with the likes of online giants such as Amazon. Of course, in Scotland, these businesses are also struggling with the high tax regime imposed on them by the SNP Scottish Government in Holyrood.

Other clauses in the Bill, such as those to ensure that HMRC is a preferred creditor in business insolventcies, that more tax is paid to the public purse and that we crack down on how insurance companies routing services through offshore territories, are certainly welcome.

**Jim McMahon:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept, though, that the trade-off with the digital services tax and the relief being offered to some premises in town centres just is not enough? Take, for instance, the former Textiles Direct unit in my local shopping centre, which has been empty for some time, but has a rateable value of £500 per square metre. Compare that to the Amazon warehouse near Manchester airport that pays just £44 per square metre. How can it be right that the gap is so large?

**John Lamont:** Clearly, I cannot speak about the circumstances in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but these measures are clearly a step in the right direction. I know the number of businesses in my constituency that contact me. They are competing with online businesses and other digital platforms to provide the same or similar types of services. It is just not fair when businesses are able to run very profitably, making a big turnover from a garage or attic, when at the same time the same service or shop on the high street is paying significantly higher business rates. Of course, in Scotland, we have the additional challenge of the additional taxes that businesses are having to pay through the Scottish Government’s high-tax agenda.

6.15 pm

The Opposition amendments that would compel the Government to evaluate and report on the impact of these measures may appear at first glance to be reasonable enough. However, HMRC already publishes annual data on the differences between what is theoretically due and the amount of tax actually collected—the so-called tax gap. It also provides an estimate of the tax gap by type of tax and by consumer group. That provides a historical trend, as well as the annual cost of tax avoidance, which can clearly be used to assess the impact and success of these measures. I know that Opposition Members are fond of these types of review provisions because they allow them to have a go at the Government when the reports are published, but I am not sure how useful the amendment will be in practice. Will these reports mean greater progress on tax avoidance, or will they just be a distraction for a Government with an already incredibly strong record in clamping down on this type of behaviour?

On tax avoidance more generally, those who practise tax law may be happy enough with its complexity, but as politicians we should all strive to make good law, which means making the law as clear as possible. The complexity of our current tax system is making it easier to avoid paying tax, so simplification is necessary if the Government are going to make further progress in tackling tax avoidance. Much has been done to try to improve this whole process. More of the Finance Bill is now published months in advance, before the Budget, and there is extensive consultation with stakeholders before legislating. The Chancellor’s decision to replace the autumn statement and the spring Budget with a single autumn Budget ended the practice of major tax changes taking place twice a year outside of a general
election year. I note that this announcement was welcomed last year by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Chartered Institute of Taxation and many other tax experts.

Last year’s Finance Bill ended permanent non-dom status, and this Bill adds to the track record of this Government in cutting down on tax avoidance. Conservative measures have seen £185 billion collected through anti-eviction and anti-avoidance since 2010. The difference between what should be collected and what is collected in taxation—the so-called tax gap—is now at a five-year low of 5.7%, one of the lowest in the world. These measures are more significant than anything the Opposition did on tax avoidance during their time in office, when the tax gap was about 10%. As always, Labour likes to talk the talk, but fails to act. By closing the tax gap further, we boost this nation’s tax revenues, not by putting up tax, as the Opposition want to do, but simply by ensuring that people pay the tax that they are expected to pay by law.

Luke Graham: I refer the Committee to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Several provisions in the Bill will help to deal with money laundering and tax avoidance, and I want to touch on a few of them, as well as on some of the comments that have been made by Labour and SNP Members, but first I would like to echo some of the Minister’s comments about tax in general. Conservative Members pride ourselves on having a low-tax but fair system that rewards work and enterprise, but ensures, in all things, that when someone has a tax liability, they should indeed pay it.

Tax should be low right across the United Kingdom. One of my Scottish colleagues referred to charges for higher-rate taxpayers in relation to the movement of residency between Scotland and England. As I am sure that SNP Members will appreciate, it is not just higher-rate taxpayers who are affected. As has been well documented over the past few months, anyone earning over £26,000 in Scotland is now worse off than if they were anywhere else in the United Kingdom. In fact, it had to be confirmed by one of the senior generals in the British military that because of the SNP’s changes, men and women in the British armed forces would pay more tax in Scotland than they would anywhere else in the world. These changes are disadvantaging my constituents and companies.

The counter-argument is that somehow those tax changes will make things fairer for my constituents, that they are providing huge opportunities, and that we should be ashamed of ourselves for not doing more. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) said, the tax changes introduced by this Conservative Government have increased constituents’ income by £1,250. The tax changes made by the SNP in Scotland have given my constituents 38p a week. That is it—all this change, all this cost and all this disadvantage for 38p a week. If the SNP Government are going to make changes, they must make real changes that make people’s lives better and follow some of our copybook.

A key point has been raised about Scottish limited partnerships. I sit on the Committee that considered last year’s Finance Bill, and when we discussed that matter with several Opposition Members, I voiced my support for changing these partnerships. We saw a change in the law in 2017, and there are now disclosure requirements for those in a limited partnership, but I want to ensure that the context of these partnerships is understood. They were originally enabled under the Partnership Act 1890, and then confirmed again in 1907 by Scottish, English, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs, so this measure was not somehow imposed in Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the regime of persons with significant control has not been enforced to any extent? SLPs owe the UK Government £2 billion in fines. Would he not welcome that money for his constituents?

Luke Graham: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Whenever we have made a law, we should enforce it. I recognise the Government’s contribution through investing more money in HMRC, but another key area is Companies House, where a lot of this information is held. I would argue that it certainly could do with extra resources to ensure that things can be properly cross-referenced. A number of issues in my constituency have revolved around significant control and ownership of different corporate entities across the United Kingdom. Companies House would benefit from additional resourcing to help to tackle some of these issues.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) talked about PFI schemes. She was very critical of Labour’s schemes when it was in administration in Edinburgh. It is important that the SNP takes some responsibility for the fact that it has been in power for over a decade, as the implementation and management of a number of these PFI schemes was overseen by the SNP. Although they have now converted to the PPP scheme, there are still a number of criticisms, including of the healthcare facility in North Ayrshire. It is right to be critical, but that criticism should be even-handed.

Alison Thewliss: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Luke Graham: I will just make a bit more progress.

The successes that we have seen from this Government include lowering corporation tax, which has led to record income from corporation tax, and collecting an additional £185 billion of revenue since 2010, which we would not have been able to achieve were it not for the Government’s tightening of tax and tax avoidance measures.

The Conservative party prefers to have a low-tax and fair system. Some of the measures in the Bill are specifically fit for purpose in this more globalised and complicated economy. For example, schedule 4 is on profit fragmentation, which means that Government can focus on where profit is earned rather than getting caught between the different jurisdictions in which corporate bodies lie.

Clause 83, on international tax enforcement, is particularly important. Before I came to this place, I worked in international finance. With multinational companies, it is very difficult to track where income is earned and where it will finally end up, and that may not be due to deliberate action by such companies. New tax enforcement measures that give HMRC and the Treasury additional powers of disclosure will be very valuable and will increase transparency in our tax system.

The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who is no longer in her place on the Labour Front Bench—
The bog.

Hansard be well recorded in accordance with the Gini coefficient. In the United Kingdom. Inequality has actually reduced means an improvement in the living conditions of people there has been a reduction in the coefficient, which compared with where we were in 2016-17, we see that for a long time. If we look at the Gini coefficient in 2010 have credible statistics that Members on both sides of the House can. Corporate tax revenues have also increased.

SNP Members could put pressure on the devolved Administrations among the nations or, indeed, down in local authorities within the devolved Administrations and right across the United Kingdom, tax collection and record keeping are incredibly important. I welcome some of the measures introduced by the Government to increase the resourcing to HMRC. I would hope to see from right hon. and hon. Members the sharing of best practice and that we ensure that some of the people working for our tax collection authorities around the United Kingdom are going right around the United Kingdom. A number of local authorities need additional support and help with tax collection, and the sharing of best practice in technology, to ensure that they are actually collecting the tax revenues they are due.

I have two local authorities in my constituency, Perth and Kinross Council and Clackmannanshire Council, both of which face very extreme council funding issues in terms of raising local funds and cuts imposed by Edinburgh. When we look at the local services that have had to be cut as a result of the reduction in funding from Edinburgh, despite the increase in the Scottish block grant, we see that it is having a significant impact on education services, health services and local street services in my constituency. I would hope that even SNP Members could put pressure on the devolved Administration to make sure that they focus on proper tax collection, and also on proper tax expenditure.

As I have said, action taken by this Government has helped to bring in over £185 billion of additional tax revenue that we would not otherwise have been able to collect. Corporate tax revenues have also increased.

A key point has been raised—many Labour Members have spoken about it—about inequality when talking about absolute and relative poverty. This is important to note, because I think that the House should look at more objective statistics. In last night’s debate, I talked about strengthening the OBR to make sure that we can have credible statistics that Members on both sides of the House recognise, acknowledge and accept.

One key aspect of that is to look at the Gini coefficient, which has been recognised as a measure of inequality for a long time. If we look at the Gini coefficient in 2010 compared with where we were in 2016-17, we see that there has been a reduction in the coefficient, which means an improvement in the living conditions of people in the United Kingdom. Inequality has actually reduced according to the Gini coefficient.

Luke Graham: I think that is a good thing that should be welcomed, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees.

Jim McMahon: Statistics can always be massaged to fit the agenda of the person citing them, but what cannot be escaped is the fact that increasing numbers of people are queuing up to use food banks because they cannot afford to feed their families and put food on the table. That is my measure of whether this country is doing well. How does the hon. Gentleman respond to that?

Luke Graham: The hon. Gentleman proves my point. He disregards an objective Gini coefficient statistic, which is accepted worldwide, and instead puts forward a subjective view on food banks that is widely contested across the House.

I would say that the increase of food banks is a major issue that we have covered extensively in debates in the House. However, taking those on the lowest incomes out of income tax altogether, getting more people into work and introducing the national living wage are the kind of measures that really do improve things for the poorest in society, and they are exactly what the Government are delivering. Our Budget has not only prioritised expenditure elements—I welcome a city deal in my region, the Tay region, with £150 million of extra expenditure—but focused on how to get more tax collected.

As I said at the outset, it is important that we have a low-tax system that is also a fair system, and that the people who should pay tax are paying the right amount.

Kevin Foster: I am listening to my hon. Friend’s speech with great interest. What are his thoughts about intangible assets, which we were talking about earlier? Does he agree that we really need to address such issues and to start considering how we can make sure that tax is both collected and fair?

6.30 pm

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I could not agree more. Intangible assets are becoming an increasing part of the global economy. Just a few years ago, I did a study in relation to the Prince’s Accounting for Sustainability project. When we looked at some of the figures, they clearly showed that up to 80% of the value of the Standard & Poor’s 500 index in the United States was being held in intangibles. In considering some of the accounting standards and taxation measures that we are introducing, we could be missing up to 80% of that value, which would not then be reflected in the share price or indeed in the tax revenues that could be captured. I agree with my hon. Friend that we should look at those measures.

Without giving the Prince’s Accounting for Sustainability project too much of a push here in the Chamber, I will say that a number of the reports that it has put forward, in partnership with businesses in the United Kingdom and internationally have been really positive. They look at how we can capture some of the value of intangibles, but they also consider human and social capital. The organisation has published a number of reports, and I encourage Members to read them, because they could help to inform our policy making not only on the digital services tax, but when it comes to evaluating the impact and true value of some of the companies and enterprises across our country. It does not matter whether it is the small enterprise on our high street or, indeed, the new multinational that is capturing funds from around the world.
It is about our identifying value and then being able to show to shareholders, Government and the local community the social, human and physical capital contributions that are being made to our economy.

Some people find Budget debates dry, but I find them incredibly exciting. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said last night that she enjoyed a good read of the Budget documents at home—I could not agree more. This Budget gives us plenty to read and plenty of food for thought, which is why I will support the Bill today.

**Chris Philp:** It is a huge pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who is always an incredibly eloquent and articulate commentator on matters financial.

I am delighted to see that news of my speech has spread to the office of the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and that he has come to the Front Bench especially to hear it. I am delighted that he has chosen to come to the Chamber for this purpose; I eagerly await the imminent arrival of the Chancellor as well.

I want to speak to new clauses 5 and 6, which were tabled by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). Their substance would require more analysis and reports on various aspects of the Government’s programme in the areas of avoidance and evasion. However, as so often in life, action and results speak much louder than reports and words. The Government’s actions and the results they have achieved are far more powerful than any call for evidence or any call for a report can demonstrate.

The hon. Lady posed some questions about whether the tax gap is the best measure. It is an internationally accepted measure and it provides for consistent comparison over time, so it is a good way of consistently comparing the record of one Government with that of another. There may be other measures, but it is at least a consistent measure and it is also a good way to compare different countries, as well as to make comparisons within a country over time.

The current tax gap in the United Kingdom is 5.7%, which is extraordinarily low by comparison with other major countries and significantly lower than it was when Labour was in office, when it was between 8% and 10%. Whatever quibbles the hon. Lady may have about the things that are included or excluded, what is clear is that the tax gap is low compared with what it was under Labour and low by comparison with other countries. That is not surprising.

**James Cartlidge rose—**

**Chris Philp:** But before I lay out the reasons why it is not surprising, I will give way to my hon. Friend.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on what action is happening, but does he agree that one thing not captured in the statistics is what I would call positive inducement as opposed to avoidance? If there are competitive rates of tax, people are encouraged to avoid avoidance and conduct legitimate activity by paying a standard tax.

**Chris Philp:** My hon. Friend is quite right. Having low and competitive rates of tax does attract people to this country, who then pay corporation tax they otherwise would not pay. I will come on to precisely that point in a few moments.

The reason I was explaining why it was not surprising that our tax gap has reduced is that the Government have taken quite a large number of measures to combat tax avoidance and tax evasion since 2010. In this Budget alone, there are 21 such measures. I was rather disappointed that by voting against the Budget on Second Reading, Opposition Front Benchers were expressing their disagreement with those 21 anti-avoidance and anti-evasion measures.

**Anneliese Dodds:** I fear, very sadly, that the hon. Member did not hear what I said on that point earlier. It is because those measures are far too weak and do not go far enough that we are voting against them. I set that out very clearly in my previous remarks.

**Chris Philp:** I am not sure that that is a very good basis for voting against something. A move forward is a move forward. I have yet to hear a detailed and coherent set of proposals that would take these measures further forward. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench are always eager to receive ideas on measures that would raise revenue. If the hon. Lady wanted to propose ideas on the Floor of the House, I am pretty sure she would find a ready audience. One such measure, the diverted profit tax, has directly raised £700 million since 2015. In addition, it is interesting that businesses talk about not just the direct effect of the diverted profit tax. Some companies, realising that they might be caught by the diverted profit tax, choose to change their behaviour and effectively choose to pay ordinary corporation tax in a more compliant way. That does not appear in the diverted profit tax figures, but it is none the less successful in changing behaviour.

**Anneliese Dodds:** I am very grateful to the hon. Member for giving way; he is being very generous. I would like to mention, however, that I did refer in my speech to Labour’s tax transparency and enforcement plan. In fact, I referred to three cases where the Government have rightly learned from that plan, which is fabulous, and are either completely or partially adopting some of our suggestions. There are, however, many other areas where they need to take action. They should look at our suggestions. There are, however, many other areas where they need to take action. They should look at our plan and learn.

**Chris Philp:** The fact that the Government have adopted three measures shows that they are not only a Government who listen and adapt, but a Government who have taken more than 100 anti-avoidance and anti-evasion measures since 2010. That is a record the Government can be proud of, although there is always more that can be done. I will come on to one idea later.

The hon. Lady suggested in her very long and at times entertaining speech—perhaps inadvertently entertaining, but it was entertaining—that the Government had not shown leadership in the area of organising international co-operation to combat tax evasion. She also said it was a concern that we are leaving the European Union as we might lose that as a forum in which to combat tax evasion and tax avoidance. The most effective forum is the OECD’s BEPS initiative—the base erosion and profit shifting initiative. The UK
Government have been a leader in this area—for example, on action five, which limited the deductibility of interest payments against corporation tax. That is another area where the UK Government have shown genuine global leadership.

**Kevin Foster:** Listening to my hon. Friend’s speech, I can see exactly why the shadow Chancellor rushed to the Chamber to enjoy it. On global co-operation, what does he make of the many treaties we have signed with other jurisdictions, such as Liechtenstein, which have allowed us to get hold of tax information and ensure there cannot be places where British taxpayers hide?

**Chris Philp:** That is an example of one of the many areas where we have taken action. Getting information from that jurisdiction and, I think, Switzerland has helped us to combat people who are not paying the tax they should. The proof of the pudding is ultimately—I can see the flood of hon. Members on to the Opposition Front Bench continuing—in the eating. The fact is that the amount of money collected in corporation tax has gone up from £35 billion to £55 billion.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), who was in his place earlier, shook his head when that point was made and referred to an IFS report, which he said made the point that if corporation tax rates were higher, they would raise more money. I have had the opportunity to look up that report since then. The article was in The Guardian, which is hardly a Conservative or right-wing newspaper—it may be too right wing for the shadow Chancellor, but it is not too right wing for me—and although any amount of money that might be raised in the short term is one thing, it goes on to say the IFS stated that “substantially less” will be raised in the medium term as companies respond by investing less.

The hon. Member for Oxford East asked what the intellectual backing was for suggesting that lowering tax rates increases revenue. That backing comes, of course, in the form of the Laffer curve, named after Professor Arthur Laffer, who made the case very coherently. The course, in the form of the Laffer curve, named after Professor Arthur Laffer, who made the case very coherently, that lowering rates can increase the take—my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) made this point earlier—by encouraging investment and encouraging companies to relocate to a jurisdiction where there are lower rates of tax. That is no theoretical thing—[Interruption.] It is not only a theoretical thing, but a practical thing.

Since the Government introduced lower rates of corporation tax, a number of companies have chosen to take advantage of them by locating into the UK. Most recently, in August this year, Panasonic moved its European headquarters from Amsterdam into the United Kingdom, and clearly, competitive rates of tax were part of that. Back in 2012, when the former Chancellor, George Osborne, set this course, a whole number of companies announced that they were locating back into the UK, including Aon, which located here from the United States, Starbucks, which located its corporate HQ here from the Netherlands, and WPP, which located its corporate HQ here from the USA. More recently, Unilever considered moving its corporate HQ out of the UK to the Netherlands, but there was a huge shareholder revolt and it chose to stay here. Those are practical examples of a competitive tax system in action. That is part of the reason why the tax yield has gone up so considerably.

**Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con):** Not just companies but entire sectors and industries might be attracted to come here. The UK film industry is so buoyant and world-leading in very large part because of the benign tax environment that it can enjoy.

**Chris Philp:** My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the way in which very favourable tax systems can indeed attract companies to this country. We should be proud of the fact that we are attracting the world’s leading companies to the United Kingdom.

I am sorry to refer to the speech by the hon. Member for Oxford East so often, but it was a very full speech and there was a great deal to reply to. She suggested that the Chancellor of the Exchequer said our plan was to become a tax haven. He never used the words “tax haven”, but he did say that we could be a tax competitive economy. There is nothing to apologise for in saying that we will be a tax competitive economy and attract companies to locate here. If there is a tax haven in Europe, it is Luxembourg, so the hon. Lady should reserve her ire for that jurisdiction.

**Anneliese Dodds:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being very generous. I have not been reserved in showing my ire for Luxembourg; in fact, I have campaigned for a long time in relation to its tax practices. I am very glad that he has given me the opportunity to respond on this point, because I looked up exactly what the Chancellor did say. He was asked by the newspaper Die Welt in January 2017 whether the UK would become a “tax haven” for Europe, and he responded that the UK could be “forced” to abandon its European economy with European-style taxation. When the Prime Minister’s spokesperson was asked if she agreed with this assessment, she confirmed that the Prime Minister was in agreement and would stand by him.

**Chris Philp:** The words “tax haven” were not his, and what he clearly confirmed in response was he intended to create a tax competitive economy, which we can all be proud of, and I will certainly support him in creating it.

I feel that I should move on—although I will happily take more interventions—to new clauses 14 and 15, which were spoken to by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), the SNP’s Front-Bench spokesman. In her speech, she drew attention to the importance of transparency, and she was right to do so. We have already made significant moves on limited companies and limited liability partnerships. Persons of significant control now have to be disclosed on the Companies House register, and I fully agree with her that that should be comprehensively enforced.

**Alison Thewliss:** The problem is that it is not being comprehensively enforced. About £2 billion is due in fines from SLPs. If the Government are not going to collect £2 billion, why on earth are they putting forward austerity cuts? They could have that money easily.

**Chris Philp:** It will not have escaped the hon. Lady’s notice that by the fifth year of the five-year period there is a fiscal loosening of £30 billion—that is hardly austerity—and that the NHS will receive a huge amount
of extra money, including the NHS in Scotland via Barnett consequentials. I think that we can say very clearly that this was not an austerity Budget. I agree, however, with her more serious point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire said, where a law is passed, it should be properly enforced, and if there is more scope to enforce this law, it should certainly be done.

A further legislative measure was announced over the summer in relation to transparency. By 2021, we will start recording the ultimate beneficial ownership of property owned by companies, which is an important measure, because some properties, particularly very expensive, high-end properties, are often owned in offshore companies, but there is currently no transparency in respect of who owns those companies. As of 2021, we will know who the ultimate beneficial owners are, and that will also create an interesting taxation opportunity that I strongly commend to the Financial Secretary.

At the moment, when an ordinary property is bought or sold by an individual, it triggers residential stamp duty, but when a transaction takes place whereby the company owning the property is sold, no residential stamp duty is paid, because, as far as the Land Registry is concerned, no change of ownership has taken place. At the moment, we have no visibility over any change of ultimate beneficial ownership, because it is not registered, but from 2021 we will, because that change will have to be registered. I suggest, for a future Budget, that a change of ultimate beneficial ownership should trigger a stamp duty charge as though for a direct change of ownership, as would happen if any of us bought a property. That would yield significant extra residential stamp duty.

I will give an example. I am aware of a transaction in Belgravia, not far from here, that took place two or three years ago. It was a collection of luxury houses developed by an offshore company—based in the Cayman Islands or British Virgin Islands—and sold to a Chinese gentleman for £110 million, but he did not buy the property and therefore no stamp duty was payable. He bought the offshore company and no stamp duty was paid. Had that change of ultimate beneficial ownership been registered and had stamp duty been payable, a stamp duty charge of about £16 million would have been crystallised for the Exchequer's benefit.

I suggest we collect that sort of money in the future. Of course, that property is liable for annual taxation on envelope dwellings, because it is held in a company, but that only levies at a rate of £226,000 a year, so the payback period is 73 years, and most of these properties are traded more frequently than that. I challenged the hon. Member for Oxford East earlier to come up with some ideas for raising revenue and combating non-compliance. There is my idea. I hope that a future Budget adopts it and takes it forward.

I will conclude—I know the shadow Chancellor wants to hear more, but I have to disappoint him—by briefly addressing Government clauses 15 and 16 on intellectual property charges and charges in relation to fragmented profits. This is an extremely important area, because a number of large corporates are using intellectual property charges to spirit away profits attributable to UK operating activities.

Most notoriously, Starbucks used this about five or six years ago. It managed to extract almost all its UK profits by levying an intellectual property charge in relation to its beans. It said the beans were special beans and had a very high charge on them, and it managed to register pretty much zero UK profit. That is precisely the kind of intellectual property charge that these measures are designed to combat. An arm's-length, third-party intellectual property charge cannot possibly result in zero profit for the company paying that charge, and it is right that the Government are taking further action.

Multinationals take their profits out of the UK and into, typically, the Luxembourg, Swiss or Caribbean jurisdictions, and intellectual property charges are more often than not the means by which they do so. I strongly commend clauses 15 and 16 for taking direct action to prevent avoidance measures that have undoubtedly cost the Exchequer. I think that I have spoken long enough about these clauses, which I shall be extremely happy to support if there are Divisions in 10 minutes' time.

Paul Masterton: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), although, as ever, the problem with following him is that he has done such a thorough and detailed job of going through the minutiae of pretty much every single piece of the Bill that there is not a huge amount left for me to say. However, I will do my best and raise a few points that I know are particularly important to people and businesses—particularly small businesses—in East Renfrewshire.

One reason why these measures are so important comes back to the perception of fairness. Action to deal with tax avoidance and evasion is important because people often perceive that they are playing by the rules and doing everything right, while other guys—often the big guys with lots of money, who can afford to pay the “big four” huge sums—are able to find clever ways of reducing their tax liability.

There have been many examples of companies diverting profits, in a way that is not fair and is not right, to other jurisdictions with much lower tax levels to save themselves money. They are taking money that was produced when taxpayers in this country went into their shops and bought their goods, supporting them and their products, but that money is not being kept in our economy or reinvested in our economy. It is being shunted offshore to other jurisdictions, where it is swept up and often manoeuvred around other areas, particularly when a global business is moving it around to prop up less competitive and less successful parts of that business offshore.

Since 2010, an extra £180 billion or so has been brought in as a result of some of the measures that we have introduced. That is a huge amount, which is being reinvested in the country in which it was produced. It means more money for our schools, hospitals and small businesses—the sort of money that can give people a bit of a break.

I want to touch briefly on the new clause tabled by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). She talks frequently, and with a great deal of knowledge, about Scottish limited partnerships—rightly, I think, because they are being increasingly scrutinised and are coming under the spotlight. They have been around for a long time, and previously no one paid much attention
to them—no one really understood what they were being used for. They fell within a slightly odd grey area in terms of the Companies Act 2006. In my former job as a pensions lawyer, they were used as a vehicle to allow companies to put an extra step between them and an investment. They helped companies to reduce their tax in relation to employer contributions that they had made through the sweeping round of funds.

That was a legitimate funding mechanism, but there is no doubt that because of where Scottish limited partnerships sit in relation to the wider tax system, they are being used pretty unscrupulously. A lot more stuff has been coming out about them, and I think that the hon. Lady is right to go on probing and testing to establish whether their proper use is being properly enforced and checked.

Alison Thewliss: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me about Scottish limited partnerships. Does he also agree that the whole scope of the issue needs to be investigated, and that the Government need to bring their consultation report back? It is clear that when one loophole is closed another opens, and there seems to be some evidence that people are now moving to Northern Ireland to try to get around the rules. The Government must do something very soon before people jump over and do something else.

Paul Masterton: The hon. Lady has highlighted the key point that I made at the beginning of my speech about highly trained and well-paid accountants. The Government are always playing catch-up because she is right: what happens is that a loophole is identified, it takes quite a long time to get a measure to close it through the process, and by then everybody has already moved on to the next thing. We need to get better at pinpointing—at almost like in a game of chess, thinking two moves ahead and saying, “If we close this down, where are they going to move next?” These people working in the private sector are able to find these money-saving methods, so there is no reason not to have people working in government thinking along the same lines.

I support what the Government are doing to reduce the tax gap. It is important to bring in the extra money that is properly due in this country by closing loopholes. It is important to bring in the extra money that is properly due in this country by closing loopholes. We need to get better at pinpointing—almost like in a game of chess, thinking two moves ahead and saying, “If we close this down, where are they going to move next?” These people working in the private sector are able to find these money-saving methods, so there is no reason not to have people working in government thinking along the same lines.

James Cartlidge: It is a pleasure to be called to speak on this important subject of anti-avoidance, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). I will take up his underlying point about fairness. There are incredibly important measures in the Bill in relation to avoidance that also deliver other positive outcomes. I am referring to the area of capital gains tax.

Earlier we discussed exit charges and CGT, but there is also an important measure in relation to foreign ownership of UK property. New measures will mean that companies will now have to pay CGT on the sales of UK commercial property, and under the way that property structures can operate, residential property could also be covered.

Anti-avoidance measures can have a positive impact. We should not underestimate the huge impact of inflows of foreign investment in pushing up property prices in this country, particularly in London, and thereby spreading out through the south-east and around the rest of the country.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not simply about pushing up the value of property, but about changing the nature of neighbourhoods, and that there is a social dynamic as well as a purely financial one?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and there are stats to prove this. In March, King’s College London published statistics estimating that foreign investment into the UK housing market had driven up prices in London by 20% over the last five years. That is a huge impact.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) rose—

James Cartlidge: I am happy to take another intervention from a Lincolnshire MP—two on the trot.

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is making an important point. The measures in this clause are part of a suite of policies that allow us to deal with the abuse of international multinational monopoly capitalists, who are skewing our economy against the interests of our people and altering the character of both our economy and our society.

James Cartlidge: It is always interesting to hear attacks on capitalists from this side of the House. I simply say in terms of the way the property market has gone that we have often focused in the debate on housing on increasing the supply of homes—the statistics just published on new housing supply are incredibly positive—but I have been a mortgage broker and involved in the property sector, and I remember what happened in the wake of the crunch. The impact of fiscal and monetary policy and the stimulus we have had, and measures that have encouraged inward investment, have also been detrimental. We must not forget, as many people might, that in 2011-12 when the euro was facing an existential crisis—who knows, at some point in the future that might well return—huge inflows of capital came into UK residential property, particularly in London, pushing up prices and impacting on first-time buyers.

Having covered that specific point, I welcome anti-avoidance measures in this area. We need a level playing field, and not just in the same way that other anti-avoidance measures give a level playing field for small businesses; we need them for first-time buyers and those in Britain seeking to get on to the housing ladder. I support these measures and the others in the Bill.

Mel Stride: We have had a good, rounded and full debate, and I thank all Members for their contributions. I wish to touch briefly on the amendments and new clauses moved this evening. New clause 5 calls for a review of the impact of the clauses in this group on child poverty, on households at different levels of income, on those with protected characteristics and on the different parts of the United Kingdom. As I have stated, the
Government already provide impact and distribution assessments and analysis in the Budget, as well as tax impact information and notes on individual tax measures.

7 pm

Amendment 23 calls for a report on how the power in clause 83 is to be exercised in the case of a negotiated withdrawal from the EU, and in the unlikely circumstances of a no-deal situation. That information would of course become known in time when precise details of our future partnership of the EU became known, or in the highly unlikely event of a no-deal situation occurring.

New clause 14, proposed by the Scottish National party, calls for a review of the effect of the clauses in this group on reducing tax avoidance and evasion and on “inducing new tax avoidance measures unanticipated by the Act”, and for estimates of the impact of the clauses on the tax gap.

In the light of the Government’s desire to reinforce what we are doing already or what we will naturally provide in a timely manner as events unfold, the Government will not oppose new clause 5, amendment 23 or new clause 14. That is subject to the information that is being sought being available, in which case we will of course provide it.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 15 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

Clause 16 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 4 agreed to.

Clauses 19, 20 and 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 7 agreed to.

Clause 23 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 8 agreed to.

Clauses 46 and 47 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 83

INTERNATIONAL TAX ENFORCEMENT: DISCLOSABLE ARRANGEMENTS

Amendment made: 23, page 60, line 8, at end insert—

(8) No regulations made by under this section unless the Chancellor of the Exchequer has laid before the House of Commons a report on how the powers in this section are to be exercised in each of the scenarios in subsection (9).

(9) The scenarios to be considered in the report under subsection (8) are—

(a) if either of a—

(i) negotiated withdrawal agreement, or

(ii) framework for the future relationship with the European Union have not been ratified under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act at the time of the United Kingdom ceasing to be a member of the European Union, and

(b) if both of a—

(i) negotiated withdrawal agreement, or

(ii) framework for the future relationship with the European Union have been ratified under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act at the time of the United Kingdom ceasing to be a member of the European Union.

New Clause 5

IMPACT ANALYSES OF THE ANTI-AVOIDANCE PROVISIONS OF THIS ACT

(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the impact of—

(a) section 15 and Schedule 3,

(b) section 16 and Schedule 4,

(c) sections 19 and 20,

(d) section 22 and Schedule 7,

(e) section 23 and Schedule 8,

(f) sections 46 and 47, and

(g) section 83.

of this Act in accordance with this section and lay a report of the review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) A review under this section must consider—

(a) the impact of those provisions on child poverty,

(b) households at different levels of income,

(c) the impact of those provisions on people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010), and

(d) the impact of those provisions on different parts of the United Kingdom and different regions of England.

(3) In this section—

“parts of the United Kingdom” means—

(a) England,

(b) Scotland,

(c) Wales, and

(d) Northern Ireland.

“regions of England” has the same meaning as that used by the Office for National Statistics. —[Anneliese Dodds.]

This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry out and publish a review of the effects of the tax avoidance provisions of the Bill on households with different levels of income, on child poverty, people with protected characteristics and on a regional basis.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 14

REVIEW OF EFFECTIVENESS OF PROVISIONS ON TAX AVOIDANCE

(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must review the effectiveness of the provisions of this Act relating to tax avoidance and lay a report of that review before the House of Commons within six months of the passing of this Act.

(2) In this section, “the provisions of this Act relating to tax avoidance” means—

(a) section 15 and Schedule 3,

(b) section 16 and Schedule 4,

(c) sections 19 and 20,

(d) section 22 and Schedule 7,

(e) section 23 and Schedule 8,

(f) sections 46 and 47,

(g) section 83.

(3) A review under this section must consider in particular—

(a) the effects of those provisions in reducing tax avoidance and evasion,

(b) the effect of those provisions in inducing new tax avoidance measures unanticipated by the Act, and

(c) estimates of the efficacy of the provisions in reducing the tax gap in each tax year from 2018-19 to 2028-29.—[Alison Thewliss.]
This new clause would require a review of the effectiveness of provisions on tax avoidance.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSUMER PROTECTION)
That the draft Textile Products (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 11 October 2018, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)
That the draft Operation of Air Services (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 17 October 2018, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

CAPITAL GAINS TAX
That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Jersey) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 November (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

CAPITAL GAINS TAX
That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Isle of Man) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 November (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

CAPITAL GAINS TAX
That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Guernsey) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 November (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

IMMIGRATION
That the draft Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 11 October, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 21 November (Standing Order No. 41A).

PETITIONS
Review the regulations and control of fireworks

7.7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition from my constituents regarding the regulation and control of fireworks. My office has seen a growing number of complaints about the issue each year. I have been inundated by videos of distressed pets that are clearly upset as a result of acoustic stress.

In answer to my written question, the Government said “no plans to amend the regulations” and that they are sticking to the 120 dB figure, so I hope that they will reconsider the matter—just as they reconsidered issues earlier tonight. As an example, the noise of a jet taking off is around 100 dB and the average human pain threshold is 110 dB, so this matter certainly needs to be looked at.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk, Declares that the petitioner believes that the use of fireworks is increasing in terms of frequency and that the resultant nuisance of noise and perceived danger from explosions are growing with the ever increasing size and power of fireworks available within the UK; further that fireworks can cause severe distress to people suffering from PTSD or other mental health issues and to animals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to review the existing legislation for the regulation and control of fireworks; further that consideration be given to legislating for a ban on private use and limited fireworks to licensed displays; and further that considerations be given to promoting the use of silent fireworks as an alternative.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Universal Credit Roll out

7.9 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Glasgow South West, the most sophisticated electorate in these islands.

The roll-out of universal credit is being felt by the constituents of Glasgow South West, and the Glasgow South West food bank reports an increase in food bank usage of 23% since 19 September, when universal credit arrived in the Govan jobcentre.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow South West, Declares that the proposed roll out of Universal Credit in the city of Glasgow will have a devastating impact on communities across the city and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Work and Pensions to halt the roll out of Universal Credit in Glasgow and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
British Exports

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.— (Amanda Milling)*

7.10 pm

**Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I am proud of our great country. We have always been innovative global leaders. In Britain we have some excellent products, goods and services that the world wants to buy. The United States is the UK’s largest trading partner. The UK exported £112 billion of goods and services to the US in 2016, which is 18% of our total. That is slightly less than double the value of exports to Germany, which is the UK’s second largest export market, at £57 billion.

But it is the emerging economies where we are seeing the greatest growth. In 2017 the UK exported £22 billion of goods and services to China, making it the UK’s sixth largest export market. Trade with India has also increased, and India’s share of UK exports has increased from 0.9% to 1.7%. I hope to see that trade increase, and the British Government should be doing all they can to ensure that we can take advantage of our historical links with the Commonwealth, China and the USA.

The PricewaterhouseCoopers report “The World in 2050” looks at how the global economy is likely to change by 2050. Its key findings are that the world economy is due to double in size in just over 30 years, far outstripping the rate of population growth. Emerging markets in the E7 are expected to grow around twice as fast as the advanced developed nations of the G7. If that model is correct, current emerging economies are projected to be six of the world’s seven largest economies in 2050, led by China in first place, India in second and Indonesia in fourth.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): My constituency of Strangford has just secured a significant contract with China for dairy and milk products worth £250 million over five years. The Secretary of State for International Trade initiated the contract, with help from local people. Does the hon. Lady agree that China and the Pacific nations are markets where we can do more with agri-food? There is a lot of trade in that area on which we can build, and when we leave the EU we can do even better. We should look towards the good times when we leave the EU on 29 March 2019.

**Andrea Jenkyns**: The hon. Gentleman and I are clearly on the same page about the opportunities for the UK when we finally leave the EU.

The US will be down to third place in the global GDP rankings in 2050, and the EU27’s share of world GDP could fall below 10%. According to this report, the UK could be down to 10th place. France will be out of the top 10 and Italy will be out of the top 20, as it is overtaken by faster-growing emerging economies such as Mexico, Turkey and Vietnam.

We are at a crossroads, and not just for our country and Brexit. There is a shift in global economic power from the west to the east. This cannot be stopped. It is right that a country with a population the size of India should have a higher GDP, which is good for tackling extreme poverty. It has also been shown that it is only through capitalism and trade that these countries will grow. The UK, as an outward-looking trading nation, has a chance to forge strong links with the economic powerhouses of tomorrow. We need to get in there first, take advantage of our position now and be able to sign free trade deals to fully maximise our opportunities.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his brilliant speech. Does he agree that there needs to be a re-examination of how the Home Office treats visa applications, too? There is a huge expectation in these countries that trade deals will come with a bargain in terms of people being able to visit and come to the UK.

**Andrea Jenkyns**: Thank you, hon. Friend. For his brilliant speech. Will he join me in paying tribute to a great British company called Rolls-Royce, which employs nearly 3,000 people in my constituency and 22,000 people across the UK? It is responsible for 2% of our nation’s exports and makes a £12.2 billion contribution to our economy, which represents 0.7% of our GDP. It is a fantastic company, with global outreach. It is ambitious and is driving the way forward. Does she agree that companies such as Rolls-Royce are going to lead the way in a post-Brexit Britain?

**Andrea Jenkyns**: Thank you, hon. Friend. For his brilliant speech. Does she agree that Rolls-Royce is a fantastic company.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Lady makes a good point about the trade deals with India and other countries, but does not she accept that there needs to be a re-examination of how the Home Office treats visa applications, too? There is a huge expectation in these countries that trade deals will come with a bargain in terms of people being able to visit and come to the UK.

**Andrea Jenkyns**: Thank you, hon. Lady. For her question and I agree; I am a Brexiteer because I think our immigration and visa system should be a level playing field.

The UK, as an outward-looking trading nation, has the chance to forge strong links with the economic powerhouses of tomorrow. We need to get in there first, take advantage of our position now and be able to sign free trade deals to fully maximise our opportunities. Brexit gives the UK an amazing opportunity to become, as the Prime Minister has said, “a truly global Britain”. However, I am sceptical about any agreement that we sign with the EU that will not allow Britain to export its goods and services freely to the world. I was impressed with the Prime Minister’s Lancaster House speech. That vision for Britain was one that I know the country could get behind, as I certainly did. The British people and I voted to leave and take back control of our future. I am disappointed for the 17.4 million people who voted to leave that this vision is currently only looking like a fantasy.

As I said earlier, by 2050, the EU27’s share of GDP is likely to fall significantly. The EU is fundamentally protectionist in its economic outlook, whereas the UK and its people can see a bright future. Protectionism is bad for growth and for trade. In a future where Italy is out of the top 20 and overtaken by countries that only a decade ago it would have seemed unbelievable for it to be overtaken by, we need to look further than the EU’s borders of Latvia or Romania.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Do we not also need to look at ourselves as a country, because the world’s third biggest exporter is Germany and it is more productive
than us? We need to become more productive and invest more in the wherewithal to create the goods that the world wants to buy.

**Andrea Jenkyns:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. This is why I am a keen Brexiteer; rather than sending money across to the EU, I would like to see it invested in our own industries, and in research and development, so that we can really have a bright future for this country.

**Mr Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): There are two elements to point out about that previous intervention. First, Germany has done significantly well, but a huge amount of that has been because its currency level at the moment is far lower than it would have been had it not been in the euro. Secondly, that has caused extraordinary damage to countries that were massive exporters, such as Italy and others, which are now literally finding themselves impoverished by the fact that so much of the Germans’ production is now dumped into their countries, at their expense. So we have to be careful when we recognise what Germany has achieved. There is much it has achieved. We need to recognise that we have to invest more and make sure we are more productive. There are plenty of ways to do that. We need to be careful when we extol the virtues of what has been going on in Europe.

**Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that around the world the direction of travel for trade has been towards bringing down barriers? When we joined the EEC in 1973, the barriers were much more substantial. The European Union ought to seek an opportunity to maintain, post Brexit, the zero barriers that we currently have.

**Andrea Jenkyns:** I thank my hon. Friend, who is another committed Brexiteer and visionary for our country.

In the Commonwealth, English is usually spoken as the first or second language. Our common law system has been inherited by many Commonwealth countries, and foreign countries encourage their people to study law in Britain. Even accounting principles and practices are usually similar to our own in the UK. In 2016, the UK exported goods and services to the Commonwealth worth £48.5 billion, which is only 8.9% of all UK exports. As a country, we have neglected this vital resource for too long, and as a nation and Government we should be doing more to actively encourage exports to these exciting economies.

In recent years, there have been some good-news stories from the Commonwealth. In my region, the number of exporters of goods in Yorkshire and the Humber that send products to Nigeria went up by 8.2%. Exports to India increased by 4.3% and exports to Australia by 1.8%. By contrast, the number of exporters to France has barely moved, at 0.2%, and the number of exporters to Italy fell by 0.4%, despite the drop in the value of the pound. Since the Canadian free trade deal with the EU, our export to Canada have increased by 9.9% compared with last year. That illustrates the benefits that new free trade agreements can have for the great exporters in Yorkshire and the Humber. Like them, I want to see more people exporting around the globe, and the Government play a large part in that ambition.

I fully agree with the Government’s industrial strategy. We need to back business and invest in skills, industries and infrastructure to ensure that we are ready for the 21st century. We need a geographically balanced economy; to encourage the UK to be the world’s most innovative economy; and to see greater earning power for all. We need continued investment and a strong business environment, guaranteeing that the UK is the best place in the world to start and grow a business.
As the Minister will confirm, research shows that companies that export have increased growth potential, are far more productive, and offer better-paid jobs. Last year, some £620 billion of goods and services exported by British companies accounted for 30% of our GDP, and UK exports are at a record high.

Andrea Jenkyns: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I, unlike him, have great belief in the British people and our businesses. I know and trust that we will continue to thrive and grow. There is no doubt that we will far outdo the performance of the EU—we will do far better, mark my words. I just wanted to put that on record.

The Department for International Trade estimates that 400,000 businesses believe that they could export but do not, and demand for British expertise and goods overseas is growing. I was pleased that the Secretary of State for International Trade recently set out ambitious plans to make Britain a 21st-century exporting powerhouse. This new export strategy aims to increase UK total exports as a proportion of GDP to 35%. We want SMEs to grow into the multinational corporations of tomorrow, and support from the Government can and will help.

I am glad that the Government are responding to a call from business. The export strategy outlines how the Government will produce smarter and more tailored support to UK companies. More support for companies selling overseas will be offered, encouraging and inspiring more businesses to export. The Government will assist businesses by providing information, advice and practical assistance on exporting, and they will connect UK businesses to overseas buyers and markets, and to each other. The policy sounds fantastic and I am sure that every hon. Member in this Chamber could get behind it—it is certainly one that I could get behind—but we need to address the elephant in the room of free trade agreements in the light of the restriction that the Prime Minister’s draft withdrawal agreement puts on our ability to be free and independent when we finally leave the EU.

Martin Howe QC has analysed the Prime Minister’s draft agreement and has come to this conclusion:

“This customs union arrangement would kill stone dead the chances of the UK following an independent trade policy after Brexit. We would not be able to offer tariff concession to free trade partners, so they would have no incentive to offer us concessions on, say, services, which we would want to export to them. Further, it will render the theoretical right to negotiate third country trade agreements during the transition period totally meaningless. Since we will be unable to tell prospective free trade partners when we will be free to implement such an agreement, or indeed whether we will ever be free to do so at all, they will have no interest in spending time and effort on serious negotiations with us.”

It is a lose-lose situation for the UK and our future.

I am a Conservative. We believe in liberalised trade, but we also believe in the determination and talent of British people and business. We believe in the benefits of a Government who support business and allow it to prosper. Some 200 years ago, Adam Smith argued in favour of free trade and against protectionism. That argument is as relevant and persuasive today as it was back then. Those arguing against free trade and for protectionism are arguing in favour of higher prices and fewer choices for the consumer, and therefore against a higher standard of living for the British public. I cannot support that. We need to be free of the EU’s protectionist bloc once and for all.

We have excellent exporters in my constituency, across Yorkshire and Humber, and throughout the UK. These are businesses that we should be proud of, and I am glad that the Government and the Secretary of State are working with businesses to support their needs and keeping exports high on the Department’s agenda. However, the Government’s draft agreement to keep the United Kingdom in the customs union with the EU will not help exporters in the medium to long term. Every day that we stay in the EU is another day when we are not able to take advantage of our historic ties with the world’s most exciting and fastest-growing economies.

Fears about our leaving the customs union have been greatly exaggerated. Brexit offers the opportunity to reduce red tape, to look beyond the bureaucratic nature of the customs union, and to establish our own free trade agreements with the rest of the world. Adam Smith may be about to be replaced on the £20 note, but that does not mean that we should forget his teachings about the importance of free markets. To echo the Prime Minister’s words, I want to do so. I want to do so for the British people and business. We believe in the benefits of a Government who support business and allow it to thrive. There is no doubt that we will continue to thrive and grow. There is no doubt that we will do far better, mark my words. I just wanted to put that on record.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I am listening to the hon. Lady’s speech, and the thing that worries me about Brexit is what happens if Britain becomes isolated from the rest of the world. What if Europe can do it cheaper? Where will all our exports go? That is my biggest fear about Brexit.

Andrea Jenkyns: I am glad that the Government are responding to a call from business. The export strategy outlines how the Government will produce smarter and more tailored support to UK companies. More support for companies selling overseas will be offered, encouraging and inspiring more businesses to export. The Government will assist businesses by providing information, advice and practical assistance on exporting, and they will connect UK businesses to overseas buyers and markets, and to each other. The policy sounds fantastic and I am sure that every hon. Member in this Chamber could get behind it—it is certainly one that I could get behind—but we need to address the elephant in the room of free trade agreements in the light of the restriction that the Prime Minister’s draft withdrawal agreement puts on our ability to be free and independent when we finally leave the EU.

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our borders, that Britain will be able to fulfil its destiny as the 21st-century exporting powerhouse that the Secretary of State himself wants the country to be.

7.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) on securing the debate, and on her passionate defence of, and advocacy for, the beneficial effects of free trade.

Between 2010 and 2017, exports from this country grew by £170 billion, and we are determined to grow them further. As the Minister for investment, I am pleased to say that we have retained our position as the No. 1 foreign direct investment destination in Europe, and we are third globally. Through foreign investment, 76,000 new jobs were created last year alone—1,500 in every single week. More than 3.3 million more people are in work today than when the Labour party left office in 2010, which means that more people are able to support themselves and their families. Quite simply, exports and investment are important because the UK needs to pay its way in the world. That is the fundamental difference between the Government and the Opposition—Labour forgets that we have to earn our way. If we do not, we will end up as every single Labour Government in history always have—with more ordinary people on the dole queue at the end of their period in office than at the beginning.

The Institute of Economic Affairs recently published a report that found that, through an increased tax take, job creation and other factors, if the value of UK exports rose a further 10%—remember that exports from this country grew more than 10% in 2017 to nearly £620 billion—we could raise a further £20 billion in tax revenue, which would fund our schools, hospitals and other vital public services on which we all rely. I should say that those are not Government figures. Nevertheless, the IEA’s work highlights just how important exports are to the social and economic health of our country. That is one of the key reasons why we now have a dedicated international economic Department. Never before had there been a Department solely focused on exports, investment and bringing down trade barriers, but in the Department for International Trade, we now have exactly that.

It was also why in August, as my hon. Friend said, we launched the export strategy—a Government-led collaboration with business that was developed after extensive engagement with firms of various sizes in different sectors right across this United Kingdom. It aims to build on our existing exporting success by setting a UK export challenge to increase exports as a proportion of GDP from 30% to 35%, moving us towards the top of the G7. We will inform, connect with, encourage and finance UK businesses so that they realise their full exporting potential. The export strategy builds on the Government’s wider industrial strategy with the ambition of making exporting the norm, not the exception, for UK businesses, and of working with firms to give them the tools they need.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con) rose—

Graham Stuart: I have very limited time, so if my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will press on and put my remarks on the record.

We are taking a whole-of-government approach as we seek to enthuse Departments, the devolved Administrations, local government and industry bodies alike. Increased exports are not just a public good in themselves, but provide so much more.

Our strategy recognises the need to find better ways to talk to exporters, business organisations and private sector providers of export support. That was why we ran a nationwide system of consultation involving roundtables, meetings, workshops, user surveys and the like to make sure that we understood the barriers that businesses faced, and to ensure that we never go back to the low levels of exports that were bequeathed by the previous Government. Many businesses said that they did not have the expertise to export, or that they lacked knowledge about local business cultures, regulations or consumer needs. That is why the Government are taking steps to use their unique position to help companies to connect into local markets and to overcome barriers to export. That can include supporting the creation of consortiums for UK firms, thereby convening businesses from throughout a supply chain to present overseas buyers with a complete, and expert, UK offer. One such example is the Infrastructure Exports: UK consortium.

We are developing new digital services to help companies to report trade barriers so that our growing trade policy function can prioritise dealing with the obstacles that are most damaging to UK businesses. We are building up—most importantly, I think—a national network of export champions involving businesses that have successfully exported and can give their expertise, advice and mentoring support so that other firms can do the same. After all, Conservative Members never forget that it is business that does business, not Government. We are simply there to facilitate and support. We have successful pilots in the midlands engine and the northern powerhouse, which represents a time-efficient and trusted way to gain the information and skills for businesses to begin to export overseas.

The Department for International Trade is leveraging its extensive overseas network in 108 countries worldwide to help to attract potential local customers. This includes participation in large expos such as Dubai 2020, or the DIT-inspired Great British festival of innovation and creativity held in Hong Kong in March this year. We are supporting the Small Business Saturday movement, as well as our annual Export Week, which we are currently in, and which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State promoted in Bristol last week. I am hosting a food and drink export event in my constituency, and I hope that colleagues on both sides of the House will consider doing the same.

We are supporting supplier fairs where foreign buyers can bring specific opportunities directly to UK businesses. Through the Prime Minister’s trade envoys, we have focused missions to highlight specific areas of expertise to overseas buyers. Giving UK business world-class support in overseas markets is why we have appointed Her Majesty’s trade commissioners in nine regions of the world. They have the experience and independence to tailor our export offer to their region and meet its unique challenges.

I will move swiftly on through my speech as I am aware of the limited time. My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood talked about
opportunities outside Europe—she is absolutely right. The IMF originally said that 90% of global growth is expected to be outside Europe in the next 10 to 15 years, and it now predicts that even in the shorter term. The Commonwealth offers enormous opportunities as well, and we have a strong record there. In the year to June 2018, UK exports to the Commonwealth amounted to £56.5 billion—a 9.5% increase from the year to 2017—which resulted in a trade surplus of £4.3 billion.

We have a very positive future to look forward to. It is a shame that the only Member from the Labour party to turn up for this debate had only one thing to say, and that was to preach doom and gloom. We are proud of the exporting record of this Government, proud of the fact that we have provided record employment, and proud of the fact that we, not the Labour party, will continue in government—

7.40 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
Mr Speaker: It has been brought to my attention that some football skills were displayed in the Chamber yesterday evening after the House rose. I am informed that the Doorkeepers on duty told the Members concerned that the Chamber was not the place for that activity. However, those Doorkeepers were advised that permission had been given. Let me assure the House that that permission certainly did not come from me.

I have received gracious—indeed, fulsome—letters of apology from the hon. Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) in relation to this incident. I think I can speak for us all when I say that our historic Chamber should not be used for this type of activity, and I gently remind colleagues that if they are seeking to use the Chamber outside of sitting hours, other than for the purpose of simply showing it to guests, frankly they should write to me asking for their request to be considered. I have said what I have said. There are no hard feelings, and I consider the matter to be closed.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rohingya

1. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps she is taking to provide long-term support to the Rohingya.

2. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps she is taking to provide long-term support to the Rohingya.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): We have provided £129 million towards alleviating the crisis in Bangladesh since August last year and helped to reach nearly 1 million people with life-saving support. We will continue to be a leader in the international response, supporting the Government of Bangladesh to meet the ongoing needs of the Rohingya refugees and host communities.

Mary Robinson: The first official day of repatriating thousands of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar ended in failure last week, after no one agreed to voluntarily return. In that context, is the Department constructing its aid programme to reflect the fact that the vast majority of Rohingya refugees will be in Bangladesh for the foreseeable future?

Penny Mordaunt: I am pleased to say that the Government of Bangladesh have respected the principle of voluntary return and have stated, quite rightly, that they will continue to do so. Our planning approach remains that refugees and host communities will require support in Bangladesh for some time, even when credible voluntary returns processes begin.

Sir Henry Bellingham: The plight of the Rohingya people is the worst regional crisis since the Bangladesh famine of 1974, which led to 1.5 million deaths. The UK’s response has been outstanding. Can the Secretary of State say something about the pressure we are putting on other countries to meet their commitments? What is her view of the supine conduct of Aung San Suu Kyi?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is quite right to point out that in addition to our own funding, we continue to ask other international partners to lean in. Generous international support has ensured that the current international appeal, which continues to the end of this year, is now funded to 72%. However, this is likely to be a protracted crisis, and sustained funding will be needed. What every refugee wants is to return home, and clearly the Burmese Government have a key role in providing assurances to people who want to go back home.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Many of the babies conceived last summer as a result of rape have now been born, and conditions in the camps are still abysmal. What post-natal support is being given for the babies and mothers who have been left with nothing?

Penny Mordaunt: This is one of the things that the UK in particular has been able to do. We have provided the lion’s share of the pre-birth maternity services, which ranges from the midwives who were there providing support and caring for those infants, to healthcare, vaccinations and ensuring that they are prioritised and in better facilities. Most of those births were during peak cyclone season.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The chair of the UN fact-finding mission in Myanmar has told the Security Council that the situation today is “an ongoing genocide”. Meanwhile, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says that the conditions in the country are “not yet conducive for returns”.

Non-governmental organisations on the ground echo these grave concerns about the pending repatriations of refugees back to Myanmar. Will the Secretary of State tell us what the Government are doing to ensure that no refugee is forcibly returned to Myanmar?

Penny Mordaunt: On the point that the hon. Lady makes about accountability and justice, it is right that we must look at all options, including the International Criminal Court. Obviously, it is vital that we work with the Bangladeshi Government to ensure that more
appropiate facilities are put in place for people and that the main camp is broken down. A huge amount of work has gone into ensuring that the refugees there know what their rights are, and although earlier it was described as a “failure”, actually the success of that failed repatriation was that nobody got on that bus, or felt obliged to or was coerced into getting on that bus.

Kate Osamor: We understand that the Government are concerned and we all share the concern deeply, so does the Secretary of State agree that the UNHCR is the best-placed agency to co-ordinate support to refugees on the ground? If so, is the Secretary of State concerned that the agency has reportedly not been consulted or informed about the decision to start repatriations, and what is the Department doing to address this?

Penny Mordaunt: This is incredibly important. We have long made the case—not just in Bangladesh, but in Burma—for the UN agencies to be given access and, obviously, the information that they need to co-ordinate things properly. We will continue to make the case for that. We all need to work together to make sure that these refugees are taken care of, and that eventually they will be able to go back home.

Rohingya Women and Girls

2. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle gender-based violence against Rohingya women and girls.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): The United Kingdom has prioritised protecting and safeguarding women and girls in the speed and scale of our response to the Rohingya crisis. Our latest funding to the crisis will reach over 250,000 people affected by sexual and gender-based violence with targeted training, psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health treatment.

Mohammad Yasin: Hundreds of incidents of gender-based violence are being reported each week in Rohingya refugee camps. In line with the recommendations in the 2015 global report on Security Council resolution 1325, will the Minister guarantee that all future funding for the Rohingya response allocates at least 15% to gender in the emergency programming?

Alistair Burt: We have given ring-fenced funding to protect women and girls—indeed, over and above the recommendation that the hon. Gentleman has raised—which forms part of our largest £70 million of support. We have provided 30 children-friendly spaces, 19 women’s centres and case management for over 2,000 survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this. We share his concern, and we are—practically—doing something about it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What practical action is being taken to ensure that the infrastructure at Cox’s Bazar improves the safety of Rohingya women and girls?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend will know that if someone goes there and sees the nature of the camp, they will realise that over a period of time improvements have been made to ensure better safety. Practical issues such as lighting, making sure that people are safe at night, is an important part of that. However, there are always concerns that there is more to be done. We have directed our efforts not just to supporting infrastructure, but to practical work with clinics and safe spaces for women and girls. Above all, this is about making sure that people have somewhere to go if they fear there is any risk, but sadly, too many people in the camps report that, as time goes on, this will still be something they need help to counter.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Last month, I attended a fundraising event held by the North East Rohingya Solidarity Campaign, which raised over £7,000 to help establish a centre for women and girls to protect those refugees from trafficking, abuse and forced prostitution. Will the Minister outline what more the Government could do to support our local communities across the UK who are standing so much in solidarity with the people described as the “most persecuted on Earth”?

Alistair Burt: First, I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and comments, and I very much support what she has been doing in her local community. With our small charities fund, Aid Match, this all goes to work to support local communities who are doing what they are doing, and to support the charities that are engaged with the work, where the United Kingdom is also providing the funding. All these things make a contribution to safe spaces, and to giving those who are running the camp the support they need to counter what they fear will be continuing issues of domestic violence and attempted trafficking in the camps the longer they are there.

UK Aid

3. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that UK aid is allocated to where it is most needed.

7. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that UK aid is allocated to where it is most needed.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): UK aid is allocated based on need, to help to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to achieve the UN’s global goals.

Tom Pursglove: UK aid rightly makes a huge difference in crisis or disaster situations, but what steps are taken to ensure that it is deployed most effectively in those circumstances?

Harriett Baldwin: Of course, that is something we have to be constantly vigilant about in all our spending, but I draw my hon. Friend’s attention to the fact that we were successful in changing the OECD’s rules, so if a hurricane hits a relatively prosperous country and brings its income down, we can spend aid there as well.

Robert Halfon: Last week, Hamas terrorists in Gaza fired as many as 460 rockets towards Israeli civilian communities. Does the Minister share my concern that Hamas’s continued misuse of international aid worsens...
the suffering of the people of Gaza? How can she be sure that UK taxpayers’ money is reaching those who need it most?

**Harriett Baldwin:** Of course the UK Government strongly condemn Hamas’s rocket firing, and are deeply concerned about the civilian casualties. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the UK has zero tolerance and needs to be constantly vigilant. We do not fund Hamas, of course, but we need to be extremely careful to ensure that UK aid reaches the intended beneficiaries.

11. **Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Because of DFID’s priority to get money to where it is most needed, this country has committed vast resources to the conflict in Syria. In addition, the Home Office says that about 10,000 Syrians are now in Britain. Is DFID prepared to bring the voices of those 10,000 Syrians in Britain together and hear from them about what they think should now happen in Syria, which is their country after all?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s consistent campaigning on the issue. She is right to draw attention to the important role that UK aid has played in the humanitarian response in Syria. I am sure that she and other hon. Members will continue to make sure that the voices of Syrian refugees in the region, and of those Syrians who have found a home here, will continue to be heard in this place.

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): A Save the Children report, published today, estimates that 85,000 children have died in Yemen in the last three years, which is equivalent to the entire population of under-fives in the City of Birmingham. Nobody doubts the Government’s commitment to give aid to Yemen, but the aid is not getting through. What can be done to make sure that the people of Yemen get that money?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman’s work on the issue. We have seen the important report today that drew that conclusion. He will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will make a statement on Yemen later today. The right hon. Gentleman can be assured that the UK Government are doing everything we can, not only to fund the humanitarian response, but to resolve the logistical challenges that face those who want to deliver humanitarian aid.

9. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Minister make the 250 million children who live in conflict zones a priority?

**Harriett Baldwin:** Yes; I reassure my right hon. Friend that children in conflict zones—there are so many of them—will continue to be a priority. I reassure hon. Members, who may have read reports that the figure was as low as 2.5%, that we do not recognise that figure. Our response to protecting children in conflict zones goes way beyond that and forms a core part of what we do.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I gently point out to colleagues that we have very little time on an occasion such as this.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) is travelling with the International Development Committee. Will the Minister confirm the Government’s policy on the UK’s continued membership of UNESCO? Does she accept that the educational and cultural work of UNESCO, both here and around the world, is of immense value and is a perfectly legitimate use of her Department’s budget? How would withdrawal from UNESCO enhance the Government’s vision of a post-Brexit global Britain?

**Harriett Baldwin:** May I reassure the hon. Gentleman—and perhaps encourage him not to believe everything he reads in the newspapers—that the UK continues to be a member of UNESCO? We continue to look to UNESCO to follow through on the reforms it promised to undertake. We continue to work with it on that.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): In May, an International Development Committee report on official development assistance found that increasing amounts spent by other Departments had “negligible targeting towards helping the poorest and most vulnerable.” Just last week, the energy watchdog Platform reported UK aid being used to help oil, gas and fracking industries with their overseas market expansion. Does the Minister understand the growing concerns about the creeping, changing nature of the UK aid budget under this Government?

**Harriett Baldwin:** The hon. Gentleman is part of a Front-Bench team that does not seem to believe in the role of the private sector at all. The Government believe that to reach the sustainable development goals—some $2.5 trillion is needed to achieve them—we need to be able to crowd in investors into other sectors. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we continue to put significant funding—some £5.8 billion—towards ensuring that more people around the world have access to clean energy.

**Palestine Refugees**

4. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): What recent representations her Department has made to the (a) EU and (b) World Bank on funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the near east.

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt):** The UK has made official-level representations to the EU and World Bank over the past three months on the position of UNRWA. We will continue to work with UNRWA and our international partners to help ensure essential services are maintained, despite the United States’ withdrawal of funding.

**Layla Moran:** Given that President Trump can now in no way be considered an honest broker in this matter, is it not time that Britain stepped up to the plate and led? Will the Government consider hosting a donor conference to make up the shortfall in funding? Further, will they support my Palestinian statehood Bill, which I will be introducing to the House later today?

**Alistair Burt:** On the hon. Lady’s second point, she will be aware that the recognition of Palestine remains a matter for the United Kingdom’s judgment in the best interests of peace and the peace process, and we hold to
that. On support for UNRWA, we continue to work with other donors and urge them to step in to assist in filling the gap in funding. We have done that with other states and we are doing that with the EU and the World Bank. We will continue to do so. We have increased our contribution this year to £57.5 million to help vulnerable Palestinians in relation to health and education. We will continue to support UNRWA.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): In June last year, UNRWA discovered a major terrorist tunnel under two of its schools in Gaza. What support can the UK give to UNRWA to ensure that its neutrality is not violated and that its resources do not get misappropriated?

**Alistair Burt**: Bearing in mind UNRWA’s particular position, particularly in Gaza, we know—I have discussed this with senior directors at UNRWA—it is absolutely essential that it maintains the integrity of its operation. When others have abused that in trying to disguise schools as places where terrorist activity could be hidden, it is essential that it deals with that. We will continue to give it every support in finding that out.

### Devolution

5. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Whether the Government have plans to devolve functions of her Department to the devolved Administrations.

**Penny Mordaunt**: In line with the answer that the Minister of State to the devolved Administrations, to contribute to such humanitarian disasters.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Ind): I urge the Secretary of State to reject the representations from the party opposite, which will result in duplication, waste and less help to those who need it. Will she also take back control of our budget from the European Union?

**Penny Mordaunt**: This coming Monday will be the last development meeting of the EU that the UK will attend. It is my sincere wish that we will be able to continue working with our EU partners on humanitarian issues and others, but I have said that we will not do this for as long as the EU discriminates against British NGOs and suppliers.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not the case that in developing countries, the brand “UK Aid” is well known and helps to promote soft power? Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should not do anything to mitigate that?

**Penny Mordaunt**: My hon. Friend is right, and the Prime Minister described “UK Aid” as a “badge of hope”. We should be tremendously proud of all that the British public enable us to do.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): How important is it that the Minister maintains diligence in ensuring that fraud and corruption are avoided in delivering our aid to those who need it most?

**Penny Mordaunt**: That is absolutely correct. It is not just fraud and corruption and making sure that our programmes are delivering for the people who need them; we also need to help developing nations to crack down on other fraud and corruption going on. There is no point in us putting aid money into or lending money to countries when more of that money is leaving those countries every year.

### Topical Questions

T1. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for International Development** (Penny Mordaunt): Next year, the UK will present a voluntary national review to the United Nations, setting out our progress on meeting the sustainable development goals. The Government welcome this opportunity to present all that we are doing to deliver this ambitious agenda in the UK and around the world. It is a team effort and I am incredibly proud of how so many British businesses, civil society and other groups are helping to achieve those goals. I hope that all hon. Members will encourage their constituents to share their stories during the start of this review process by going to the gov.uk portal.
Tom Pursglove: Last year, Members across the House welcomed DFID’s £3 million of funding aimed at bringing Israelis and Palestinians together. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the allocation of the funding for those projects to help to bring these groups together?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): This invaluable programme is now up and running. It is working in Israel and the Palestinian territories to bring together young leaders and connect them, to work together on reducing tensions on inter-religious sacred sites and to help to tackle a neglected tropical disease, leishmaniasis, by working co-operatively together.

T2. [907741] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Climatic change is one of the biggest challenges facing humanity. What are the Government doing to protect the world’s poorest? Will they make it a top priority?

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that £5.8 billion from our aid budget is to be spent in this area over the years to come and that so far it has helped 47 million people adapt to climate change around the world.

T3. [907742] Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In the light of yesterday’s horrifying revelations of children being beaten, tortured and starved in Libyan detention centres to which they have been returned after trying to cross the Mediterranean, will the Government increase the number of safe and legal routes to sanctuary using refugee resettlement?

Harriett Baldwin: I am so pleased my hon. Friend had the chance to visit Kenya and see that remarkable work. We are working throughout east Africa to ensure a comprehensive approach to defence and security as well as to humanitarian issues across the region.

T4. [907743] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Earlier this month, I visited Kenya as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme and heard from the defence support there about the work it is doing to tackle al-Shabaab. How is the Department working with the Ministry of Defence to promote peace and prosperity?

Alistair Burt: The situation in Libya remains extremely difficult. These abuses that come to light remind us all that Libya cannot be forgotten and that the efforts to reduce conflict and create peace must continue, as happened in Palermo last week. We are spending £75 million on safer migration routes to help tackle some of these crises, and we continue to do all we can to get people out of the difficult areas, but it requires international co-operation.

T5. [907744] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State might be aware that the greatest killer of children and young people in our world is road accidents and the attendant serious injuries. Could we put more money into partnership working with the United Nations and the World Health Organisation to tackle this problem?

Penny Mordaunt: We should praise the work of British Rotarians and Rotarians around the world for the progress they are making on eradicating this disease. When it is achieved—and it will be—it will be only the second time in humanitarian history that it has been done.

T6. [907745] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update the House on the UK’s contribution to eliminating polio around the world, and will she join me in welcoming the efforts of Bramhall and Woodford Rotary through its Purple4Polio fundraising campaign?

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907748] Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 21 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Today is the centenary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, under which women were first allowed to stand for public office, and I am delighted that the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons was a Conservative. Women are coming from all over the United Kingdom to the #AskHerToStand day event,
with MPs from every party extending invitations to their constituents. This will be an inspirational day, which the Government are delighted to support, and we hope that it will encourage many more women to consider standing for political office both locally and nationally. It is appropriate that we are reminded of the significant contribution made to the House by female MPs, including the fine example set by the late Jo Cox.

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.

Andrew Rosindell: The Prime Minister will know that what drives me in politics has always been a love of country and a passionate belief in our United Kingdom, so I have to tell the Prime Minister that I agree with the people of Romford. They are deeply unhappy about the proposed EU deal, which they believe does not represent the Brexit for which they voted. Will the Prime Minister now please think again, even at this late stage, and instead lead our country in a new direction, completely cutting away the tentacles of the EU from our cherished island nation once and for all?

The Prime Minister: I think that people across the country who voted to leave the European Union voted to bring an end to free movement. Our deal delivers an end to free movement. They voted to bring an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK. Our deal delivers an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. They voted for us to stop sending vast sums of money to the European Union every year so that we could spend that money on our priorities, and we will be able to spend it on priorities such as the national health service. However, the European Union remains a close trading partner of the United Kingdom. As we leave the EU, we want to ensure that we continue to have a good trading relationship with it, and we will be able to have an independent trade policy that will enable us to make decisions to trade around the rest of the world.

My hon. Friend is indeed a passionate champion of the United Kingdom, but he is also a passionate champion of the links that the United Kingdom has with many parts of the world—including the Commonwealth—and those can be enhanced when we leave the European Union.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for welcoming Fazila Aswat to Parliament today. She is a most welcome guest.

On the hundredth anniversary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, I join the Prime Minister in welcoming all women to Parliament today as part of the #AskHerToStand campaign. We need a Parliament that truly does represent the diversity of the whole country.

Now that a number of Ministers have confirmed this morning that leaving the EU with no deal is not an option, does the Prime Minister agree that there are no circumstances in which Britain would leave with no deal?

The Prime Minister: No. I have consistently been clear on this point. The point that has been made by a number of my colleagues in relation to the vote that will come before the House—a meaningful vote on a deal from the European Union—is very simple. If we look at the alternative to that deal with the European Union, we see that it will either be more uncertainty and more division, or it could risk no Brexit at all.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister did not answer the question. Is this the final deal or not? The Work and Pensions Secretary says, “This is the deal. It’s been baked”—well, it is half-baked—but other members of the Cabinet want amendments to the withdrawal agreement. The Leader of the House said last week that there was “still the potential to improve on...some of the measures...that’s what I’m hoping...to help with.”

Can the Prime Minister clarify whether last week’s withdrawal agreement is the final text, or is there another text that is on its way to us?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that he will not get any different answers on this than he has had from me previously. There are two parts to the deal package we are negotiating with the European Union: the leaving part, which is the withdrawal agreement; and the future relationship, which is what is continuing to be negotiated with the European Union. They go together as a package. Yes, the withdrawal agreement has been agreed in principle. The whole package will be what is brought before this House and will be what is considered at the European Union Council on Sunday, and we continue to negotiate on that future relationship to get the good deal that we believe is right for the United Kingdom: a good deal that protects jobs, protects our Union and protects our security.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister is apparently heading off to Brussels today, but the new Brexit Secretary is another non-travelling Brexit Secretary—he is apparently not going with her. I wonder if the post is now an entirely ceremonial one. The Prime Minister’s agreement does not specify how much we would have to pay to extend the transition period. Can she confirm that the choice facing the country would be either the backstop or paying whatever the EU asked us to pay to prolong that transition period?

The Prime Minister: No, the right hon. Gentleman is wrong on that. Let us just remind ourselves what we are talking about: we are talking about the guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. First of all, that is best ensured by getting the future relationship in place by the end of December 2020. In the event that that was not the case for a temporary period and an interim arrangement was in place, the choice the right hon. Gentleman set out is not the choice that would be before us. Yes, there will be the backstop in the protocol and, yes, there will be the extension of the implementation period, but what we have also negotiated in the withdrawal agreement is that alternative arrangements could be in place; the key is that they guarantee no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Jeremy Corbyn: The truth is that the Prime Minister’s idea of taking back control of our money is to hand the EU a blank cheque, and after 2020 no rebate for the UK.
The EU’s trade deal with Canada took seven years to agree, and the deal with Singapore took eight years. The Business Secretary said this week that the transition will have to be extended until the end of 2022. Outside the EU and with no leverage, does the Prime Minister think she is fooling anyone by suggesting a free trade agreement will be finalised by December 2020?

The Prime Minister: The future relationship that we are negotiating will set out the structure and scope of that deal, which we will be ensuring we can negotiate in legal text once we leave the European Union, but I think people will have seen from the right hon. Gentleman’s question to me previously the problem he has with this deal: he has not even read it; he does not know what is in it. He says there is a problem with the deal and he would do it differently, he wants to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement but has not read it, and he wants to oppose any deal no matter how good it is for the UK but he will accept any European Union deal no matter how bad it is for the UK. And then he wants to use the implementation period that he would vote against to renegotiate the treaty that delivers the implementation period. And he has said that another referendum is not an issue for today, but it could be an issue for tomorrow. He does not know how he would vote; he does not know when it would be; he does not even know what the question would be. That is not leadership; that is playing party politics. I am working in the national interest.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is the right hon. Lady’s Government who have got us into this shambles. [Interruption.] And she knows full well that the new European Parliament—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Nobody in this Chamber will be shouted down. We have often heard it said with high authority from the respective Front Benches that that would be bad behaviour. It is happening now. Stop it, because it will not work.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister knows full well that with a new European Parliament in place next summer and a new European Commission at the same time, there will be less than a year for the negotiations on a future trade agreement and for her to achieve what she claims she can.

In February, the Prime Minister said that creating a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea is something that “no UK Prime Minister could ever agree to”.—[Official Report, 28 February 2018, Vol. 636, c. 823.]

Can the Prime Minister explain why the backstop agreement would create exactly that border?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that it would not create exactly that. From February until the last few weeks, the European Union said that the only answer was a Northern Ireland-only customs territory in relation to the guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland. We argued and we resisted. We made it clear that we would not accept the position of the European Union, and a few weeks ago they agreed with our position. They conceded to the United Kingdom, so that there will not be a customs border down the Irish sea. It is becoming even clearer that the right hon. Gentleman does not actually know what is in the withdrawal agreement, the protocol or the outline political declaration. Never mind a second referendum; he has not got a first clue.

Jeremy Corbyn: Given the shambles that this Government have got into, it is a good idea that other people are not ruling out all options. There is an entire protocol in the withdrawal agreement setting out regulations that apply only to Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister clearly did not discuss the draft agreement with the DUP, because its Brexit spokesperson said:

“We are clear—we will not be voting for this humiliation”. This deal is a failure. It fails the Prime Minister’s red lines; it fails Labour’s six tests—[Interruption.] And it failed to impress the new Northern Ireland Minister, who said just hours before he was appointed that “the deal is dead”. Instead of giving confidence to the millions of people who voted both leave and remain, this half-baked deal fails to give any hope that can bring the country together again. Is it not the case that Parliament will rightly reject this bad deal? If the Government cannot negotiate an alternative, they should make way for those who can, and will.

The Prime Minister: The public gave us an instruction to leave the European Union, and we should all be acting to deliver that. All the right hon. Gentleman wants to do is play party politics.—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Kinnock, you are a cerebral denizen of the House. Gesticulation and shouting are way beneath your pay grade, man. Calm yourself and develop some sense of repose. I said that the Leader of the Opposition should not be shouted at. The Prime Minister should also not be shouted at. Let us hear her reply.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is playing party politics. He is opposing a deal that he has not read. He is promising a deal that he cannot negotiate. He is telling leave voters one thing and remain voters another. Whatever he might do, I will act in the national interest.

Q4. [907751] Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I am a great supporter of the Prime Minister and, along with the British people, I accept what a difficult and tough job she has. There is much in the withdrawal agreement that I agree with, especially on food and farming, but it is not good enough as it stands. The Northern Ireland backstop threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom and weakens our negotiating position, and my farming instincts tell me that we should not hand over £39 billion before we get the deal. Please will the Prime Minister listen to these concerns and renegotiate the deal before we put it before the House?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend mentions the issue of paying over money to the European Union. As I have consistently said—and as I hope I indicated in my first answer to the Leader of the Opposition—nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, and we remain in negotiations on the future framework. In relation to the £39 billion—which I remind my hon. Friend is significantly
less than the £100 billion the European Union was first talking about us needing to pay—this is about the United Kingdom’s legal obligations. I hope that every Member of this House will recognise that the United Kingdom is a country that meets its legal obligations.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I also welcome the anniversary of the Act that gave women the right to be represented in this Parliament—of course, it was a nationalist who was first elected—but we can celebrate success only when women are properly represented in this Parliament.

Yesterdays, the Prime Minister met the First Minister of Scotland, who made it clear that there are alternatives represented in this Parliament.

The Prime Minister: Of course I heard what the First Minister said. The First Minister’s alternative is for the United Kingdom to stay in the single market and the customs union, and that is what we will not do.

Ian Blackford: This is exasperating. At least staying in the single market and the customs union has some support in this place. [Interruption.] [Hon. Members: “Ooh!”] When we look at the report from the UN rapporteur this week, we see that up to a quarter—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The leader of the Scottish National party will be heard. I do not think that Members will want to hear the question again and again and again, but let us be absolutely clear that if they shout their heads off, they will have to hear it not once, not twice, but possibly three times.

Ian Blackford: In the week when we heard from the UN rapporteur that up to a quarter of the people of the United Kingdom are living in poverty—something the Department for Work and Pensions also recognises—why does the Prime Minister not recognise the scale of the challenge, which Brexit is only going to make worse? Why does she not realise that she has a responsibility to protect jobs and communities in this country? For once, start to listen, go back to Brussels, and recognise that we all have an interest in this. Let us all work together to make sure that we protect the interests of people in Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom: make sure that you go back and negotiate. Let us stay in the single market and the customs union.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says, “Let us all work together”, but the position that he and his party have would frustrate the vote of the British people in relation to leaving the European Union. He talks about protecting jobs, and that is exactly what the deal we are proposing does. He also talks about listening. Perhaps the SNP should listen to the people of Scotland, who gave a very clear view that Scotland should remain in its most important economic market: the internal market of the United Kingdom.

Q5. [907752] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Twenty-year-old Tommy Cowan and 18-year-old Georgia Jones, both from Havant, were sold ecstasy at a music festival and tragically lost their lives afterwards. As the inquest continues, will my right hon. Friend set out the work being done to tackle the drug dealers who prey on our young people, and will she join me in sending the condolences of the whole House to their families and friends?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that all Members on both sides of the House will want to join me in offering our deepest condolences to the families of Georgia Jones and Tommy Cowan after their tragic deaths. As my hon. Friend knows, drugs can devastate lives, ruin families and damage communities. Our comprehensive drugs strategy sets out a balanced approach that brings together the police, the health community and global partners to tackle the illicit drugs trade and protect the most vulnerable in our society, and tough enforcement is a fundamental part of that. We are taking a smarter approach to restricting supply, adapting our approach to reflect changes in criminal activity, using innovative data and technology, and taking co-ordinated partnership action to tackle drugs alongside other criminal activity. The National Crime Agency has a key role in dealing with the terrible aspect of drugs that can cause so much harm to people, but of course there is more that we need to do to prevent harm and tragic deaths, such as those of Georgia and Tommy.

Q2. [907749] Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Over the past three weeks, I have surveyed 42 schools in my Weaver Vale constituency. More than £3.4 million will be taken from their budgets, and 60% of those schools have cut staff. The Prime Minister’s claim that austerity is over is as credible as her Brexit plan. Will she get a grip or step aside?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are putting extra money into school funding; he will know that we have changed the national funding formula to make it fairer across the country; and I would hope he welcomes the fact that in the north-west we now see over 895,000 children in good or outstanding schools—an increase of over 175,000 children since 2010. He focuses on the money going into schools; he also needs to look at school outcomes, at the excellent work being done by our teachers and at the children who are now in good or outstanding schools who were not in good or outstanding schools under the last Labour Government.

Q8. [907755] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming Debbie Pritchard, a specialist teacher from Harlow who is visiting us for #AskHerToStand day and is watching from the Public Gallery? Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is a question not just of getting more women into Parliament but of encouraging women from all walks of life, especially from disadvantaged, low-income and working-class backgrounds? Does she support initiatives by the Conservative Party Foundation such as the Conservative candidate bursary scheme to enable more women to access public life?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to welcome my right hon. Friend’s constituent Debbie Pritchard, and I hope she will consider standing for Parliament. We talk about diversity in relation to getting more women into Parliament, but my right hon. Friend is right that we also need to ensure that we have people in this Chamber
from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of experience, because that is the way to get better decisions made in this Chamber. I am pleased that the Conservative party has been taking action through the bursary scheme and through its work to support disabled people into politics and to encourage people from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of experience to stand for Parliament and represent constituents in this Chamber.

Q3. [907750] Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister has just repeated that voting down her deal risks there being no Brexit at all. Does she recognise that, far from being a risk, recent polls show that, actually, a vast majority of people would like no Brexit at all in order to save jobs, protect the environment and ensure our standing in the world? Will she acknowledge that the will of the people has changed? Does she therefore think that the way forward is a people’s vote, or does she think democracy ended on 23 June 2016?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady’s claim in relation to democracy is absolutely ridiculous. This Parliament gave people the right to choose whether to remain in the European Union or to leave the European Union. People exercised that vote, and we saw numbers of people voting that we had not seen before. It was a great exercise in democracy in this country, and I believe it gave this Parliament an instruction. We should ensure that we leave the European Union, as the people voted.

Q4. [907754] Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that school funding is up, and it is, but pupil numbers are up and costs are up, so the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that since 2010 there has been an 8% real-terms per pupil cut. How can the Prime Minister expect anybody to trust her on anything when she cannot get her numbers right?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady, as I have said before in this Chamber, that overall per pupil funding is being protected in real terms by this Government. The core schools budget this year, at £42 billion, will be at its highest ever level. We are protecting through the pupil premium this year; we are giving £2.4 billion to support those who need it most. The core schools budget is rising by nearly £2.6 billion across this year and the next. But what we have also done, alongside putting extra money into schools, is introduce a fairer national funding formula, which ensures that we see a fairer distribution of that money across the country.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend affirm to this House today and to the President of the Commission tonight that as we move to honour the result of the referendum, it will remain our firmest intention to retain the closest possible relationships with our European friends and allies, in the very best interests of both?
The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that I am happy to give that commitment. I think it is important for us to recognise that although we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving Europe; we do want to continue to have not just a good trading relationship and close trading partnership with the EU, but that close security and defence partnership that we have had with the European Union and other countries across Europe as well. As he says, this is what makes sense, not just for the UK, but for all those European Union member states as well.

Q9. [907756] Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): Since the Prime Minister’s Modern Slavery Bill passed, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and France have joined Norway, Sweden and Iceland in passing a sex-buyer law. That makes us an even more lucrative market for sex traffickers because we are now, in effect, surrounded by states that tackle the demand which drives commercial sexual exploitation. In responding to the independent review of her legislation five years on, will she now commit to looking seriously at a sex-buyer law?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises what is obviously an important issue. Having introduced the Modern Slavery Act, I am pleased to say that between 2015 and 2017 we saw a 52% increase in the number of modern slavery offences prosecuted. There is more for us to do, but we should welcome the change that has already taken place.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about a sex-buyer law. Separate to the review of the Modern Slavery Act, the Home Office has provided funds for research into the nature and prevalence of sex work in England and Wales, and that follows a Home Affairs Committee report on prostitution. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, we believe that we have an evidence base before we consider any changes in this policy area. The research that is taking place will be completed next spring.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Can the Prime Minister assure the House today, as she has done on many other occasions, that the UK will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019—come what may?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all thank my right hon. Friend for the work that she did as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and, indeed, for the work that she had done as a Minister previously? In particular, the Disability Confident scheme, which she championed and continues to champion, has had an impact on the Disability Confident scheme, which she championed previously. That will of course be a decision for us, here. What is important is that we have a means of ensuring that the backstop remains temporary. The best means of doing that is what we are doing at the moment: negotiating the future relationship, which will ensure that the backstop, if it is ever used, remains temporary, and preferably is never used at all.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We want young people to feel secure if they are walking through the streets or gathering in a park with their friends. In looking at the concern that has been expressed about crime—in particular, I recognise the concern that has been expressed about knife crime and levels of knife crime—we need to tackle the issue in a number of different ways across the board. It is about ensuring that we have the right powers for the police and that we have the right system in the criminal justice system, but it is also about providing education for young people about the risks of carrying knives and about providing alternatives to those young people who are tempted to join gangs, because a lot of the crime that we see is related to gang activity. This is something that has to be addressed across the board, and I recognise the importance of doing that to ensure that young people have the security, safety and confidence that they need.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Unlike the Leader of the Opposition, I and other colleagues have read the draft withdrawal agreement and the many briefings. It is clear to me that the Prime Minister and her Cabinet have laudably tried to reconcile the demand for continuity of market access today with freedom to diverge tomorrow. Is not the truth of the backstop as drafted that if—and as—we were to exercise our regulatory freedom, whether in agri-food or data protection, we would allow the EU to harden the border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Can the Prime Minister reassure me, and seek reassurance in Brussels today, that the draft does not contain a trap, whereby if we dare to diverge, we will undermine our Union?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend will know, and as I set out earlier, if it is necessary to have an interim arrangement to provide the guarantee in relation to the border of Northern Ireland, there are a number of ways in which that can be achieved—the backstop, as identified in the protocol, the extension of the implementation period, or alternative arrangements—and work is being done on them.

The backstop is intended to be a temporary arrangement, and for that limited period of time. If my hon. Friend just casts his mind to a practical thought about what could happen, if we were in the situation where the backstop had to be in place for a matter of months, for example, it would be right for the United Kingdom to give the commitment that we would not be looking to diverge from regulations during that period and that we would ensure that we kept that free access for the goods from Northern Ireland coming into Great Britain, as we have committed in the withdrawal agreement—in the text that is set out—and as we had committed previously. That will of course be a decision for us, here. What is important is that we have a means of ensuring that the backstop remains temporary.
tragedy, that is poverty. Which of the fundamental failures in implementing universal credit does this Prime Minister most regret—her failure to fund this fully, or the decision taken to triple the time that those who need a safety net have to wait to receive payments to which they are fully entitled?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will know that we made changes to universal credit to ensure that people are able to access 100% of their payments at the earliest possible stage if that is what is necessary. She raises the issue of poverty. Let me just give her a few figures. There are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty today—a record low; 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty—a record low; and 637,000 fewer children living in workless households—a record low. That is due to the action of this Government and the impact of universal credit.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Durham University PhD student Matthew Hedges was arrested when he was leaving the UAE, having completed his research into the impact of the Arab spring on the UAE’s foreign policy. He has now been sentenced to life imprisonment for spying for the United Kingdom. A number of us will note the irony of a former MI6 officer who works in the outer office of the de facto ruler of the UAE who has organised many of the excellent visits from this House to the UAE. The action is wholly inconsistent with the behaviour of a nation with which we have a mutual defence accord. Will the Prime Minister please give this her urgent attention? If he is not released, I do not see why we should be committed to its defence.

The Prime Minister: We are, of course, as is my hon. Friend, deeply disappointed and concerned at today’s verdict, and I realise how difficult and distressing this is both for Matthew Hedges and for his family. We are raising the matter with the Emirates authorities at the highest level. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is urgently seeking a call with the Foreign Minister, Abdullah bin Zayed. During his visit to the UAE on 12 November, he raised the issue with both Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and the Foreign Minister. I can assure my hon. Friend and other Members that the Foreign Office will remain in close contact with Matthew, his family and his lawyer. We will continue to do all we can to support them as they consider the next steps, and we will continue to press this matter at the highest level with the Emirates.

Q13. [907761] Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Prime Minister is having a rough old time of it at the moment, but I am sure that she recognises that there are issues other than Brexit with which we need to be dealing. On that basis may I ask her, on behalf of my constituent, Claire Throssell, whether we will get the promised domestic violence Bill on the statute book before the end of the parliamentary Session?

The Prime Minister: I first send my deepest condolences to Claire Throssell, the hon. Lady’s constituent, and pay tribute to the fantastic work that she does as an ambassador for Women’s Aid. We are committed to transforming the response to domestic violence. The consultation that took place in the spring received more than 3,200 responses, which shows the degree of concern that people have over this issue of domestic violence and the recognition of the need to look carefully at the legislation on this. I understand that the Home Office will be publishing a response to the consultation together with the draft Domestic Abuse Bill later this Session.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): All the evidence shows that diversity delivers better decision making, yet, over the past 100 years in this place, 4,503 men have been elected and just 491 women. I am proud that two of those Conservative women became Prime Minister, but can my right hon. Friend share with me what she feels that Parliament, as well as the political parties, can do to help to encourage more of the women who are with us here today as part of the Ask Her To Stand campaign actually to go forward and stand for election and join us on these Green Benches?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for championing this important cause. She is absolutely right that greater diversity in this place means that we get better decisions; that is the same for Parliament as it is for a business or any organisation. We should send a very clear message from everybody across this House about the significance of the work of an individual Member of Parliament and the change they can make for their community. Being a Member of Parliament is one of the best jobs in the world. It is an opportunity to make a real difference to people’s lives, to be a real voice for those whose voice otherwise would not be heard and to take decisions that will lead our country forward and provide a better future for people’s children and grandchildren. It is a great job and I encourage all the women who are here today and thinking of standing to stand for Parliament, get elected and make a difference.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In the December joint report agreed between the European Union and the United Kingdom, it was agreed that Northern Ireland would have the final say on whether it diverged from the UK single market and was subjected to single market European rules with no say. Why has the Prime Minister deleted all reference to that in the withdrawal agreement? Did she push the delete button?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the December joint report. The issue of what the processes in the United Kingdom would be when it comes to looking at the regulations is a matter for the United Kingdom to determine; it is for us to determine both our parliamentary decisions on that and the Stormont lock that was expressed in the December joint report. As the right hon. Gentleman will also know, the lock in the December joint report referred to a decision being taken by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly, which sadly are not in place today.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): On Monday, at an event for cystic fibrosis sufferers organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), I heard something that I never want to hear again: a young woman in her 30s actively researching funeral plans because she has cystic fibrosis and knows there is no cure. My question is about the conversation between the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NHS England and Vertex, which has been at an impasse for almost three years now, about access to Orkambi for patients who need it. Pharmaceutical companies are of
course entitled to make profit, and research and
development is expensive and lengthy, but now that we
have reached the point at which the Health and Social
Care Committee is having to ask for transparency on
the finances to try to break the impasse, we know we
have to do something differently. Looking at the huge
global forward profits for Vertex, will the Prime Minister
personally work with the Health Secretary to break this
impasse and get Orkambi to those patients who are
desperate to relieve their cystic fibrosis symptoms?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend’s question is an
important one, which has been raised in the House
before. I recognise the concern about the length of time
it has taken to work on this issue. The Department of
Health and Social Care is working with NICE and the
NHS. I believe that they have made the single biggest
drug offer in the history of the NHS to Vertex, the
pharma company; and Vertex needs to work with NICE
to get this approved. I will ensure that the concern
expressed by my hon. Friend and that I know exists in
relation to this matter is fully made clear to the Department
of Health and Social Care in the work that it is doing
with NICE, the NHS and the pharma company order
to ensure that the result is of benefit to the patients who
are looking desperately for this drug.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Article 171 of
the withdrawal agreement says that in the event of
deadlock in the arbitration panel on a dispute on any
aspect of the treaty, the chair, who has the decisive vote,
will be chosen “by lot”. Now, I know the Government
are close to the gambling industry, but is it not rather
reckless to leave crucial decisions of national importance
under the withdrawal agreement to the toss of a coin?

The Prime Minister: We have put in place arbitration
arrangements that mirror arbitration arrangements that
exist in other international treaties. The right hon.
Gentleman will also be aware that the withdrawal agreement
also says that five individuals—I think that is the number
given—will be identified as suitable to be chairman of
the panel.
Points of Order

12.49 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will hear the hon. Gentleman when the House has composed itself. In the frankly extraordinary circumstance that there are right hon. and hon. Members who do not wish to hear his point of order, I think it is seemly to wait until their speedy and quiet exit has taken place and the rest of us can listen to his mellifluous tones.

Chris Elmore: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice on a recent report from the Procedure Committee regarding speaking limits on speeches in the Chamber and an older report on a review of the Standing Orders of the House. I was concerned when I saw various Standing Orders that make reference to the influence of the Chair in controlling proceedings and, of course, the conduct of Members. Oddly and archaically, in my view, these Standing Orders make reference only to members of the House being male. For example, page 43 of Standing Orders, on Nos. 42 and 42A on irrelevance or repetition—something that I know Members of the House never take part in, Mr Speaker—states:

“The Speaker, or the chair, after having called the attention of the House, or of the committee, to the conduct of a Member who persists in irrelevance, or tedious repetition either of his own arguments or of the arguments used by other Members in debate, may direct him to discontinue his speech.”

It further states:

“The Speaker, or the chair, may direct any Member who breaches the terms of the sub judice resolution of the House to resume his seat.”

On further inquiry, I found that there are numerous Standing Orders that make reference to “him” or “his” in relation to Members of the House, and no Standing Order I have read makes reference to women holding seats in the House. In the Procedure Committee’s report of three years ago, “Revision of Standing Orders”, a recommendation was made for amendments for gender-neutral language, such as “he or she” for “he”, when the pronoun does not refer to a holder of a specific office, or drafting to avoid the need to use a gendered pronoun.

My understanding is that this recommendation has never been implemented, despite being several years old.

In all sincerity, Mr Speaker, I am sure you would agree that if we are to be a truly progressive Parliament, especially on the day on which 100 years ago—as referenced earlier by the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—women were rightly allowed to stand for Parliament, and in the year of universal suffrage, something as basic as our Standing Orders should reflect the fact that women are allowed to serve and sit in this House.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter as a point of order. Moreover, I think it fair to say, and I doubt anybody will demur as I do so, that no one could accuse him of excluding from his point of order any matter that he thought might in any way, at any time and to any degree be judged to be material. I have no comment to make on his observations about the Procedure Committee’s deliberations on time limits. Moreover, what he said on other matters—for example, tedious repetition—was unexceptionable, and there is no need for me to add to it.

However, on the main point that I think the hon. Gentleman wished to register with the House, let me say that I fully share his concern about this matter. Many right hon. and hon. Members, and observers outside the House, will agree with him that it is frankly archaic that our Standing Orders use gendered pronouns. It is deeply unsatisfactory that the revisions to the Standing Orders proposed by the Clerk and recommended by the Procedure Committee in March 2015 have still not been brought to the House for decision. I would very much like to expedite these changes, but, as the hon. Gentleman will know, this does not lie in my hands. I would encourage him to pursue the matter with the Leader of the House at business questions, and perhaps also to urge his colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench to press, through the usual channels, for action. Meanwhile, I hope that his concern, which I have reiterated I share, has been noted by those on the Treasury Bench.

Rehman Chishti: Thank you, Mr Speaker. One hundred and twenty-five Members of Parliament from across the House, including Lords Spiritual, have written to the Prime Minister asking the Government to do the right thing in the Asia Bibi case, where somebody’s life is in grave danger and they are being persecuted for their faith. My question to you, Mr Speaker, is this: how long should those Members of Parliament have to wait to hear from the Prime Minister in a case of such importance where we, the United Kingdom, should offer asylum and act quickly, because somebody’s life is in grave danger?

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

Mr Speaker: Oh, does the hon. Gentleman really feel that the House needs to hear him at this time?

Rehman Chishti: It does.

Mr Speaker: Well, hopefully so.

Rehman Chishti: Thank you, Mr Speaker. One hundred and twenty-five Members of Parliament from across the House, including Lords Spiritual, have written to the Prime Minister asking the Government to do the right thing in the Asia Bibi case, where somebody’s life is in grave danger and they are being persecuted for their faith. My question to you, Mr Speaker, is this: how long should those Members of Parliament have to wait to hear from the Prime Minister in a case of such importance where we, the United Kingdom, should offer asylum and act quickly, because somebody’s life is in grave danger?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. What he did not say was when he wrote the letter. In my experience, the Prime Minister is as courteous as anybody in this House. She receives a very large volume of correspondence, as other very senior Members do, and it is her usual practice to respond timeously, but I do not know when the letter was written. All I would say is that the matter is clearly of the highest importance, and I hope that by the ruse of a point of order the hon. Gentleman has effectively expedited the matter. If he has not succeeded in doing so, I have a feeling that we will be hearing from him again ere long. I thank him: it was indeed an important matter, and I appreciate him raising it. If there are no further points of order—if the appetite has now been satisfied—we come to the urgent question.
Yemen

12.56 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK’s effort to secure a new UN Security Council resolution on Yemen.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising this vital issue. The conflict in Yemen has escalated to become one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. Today, 8 million people—nearly a third of the population—depend on United Nations food aid. Starvation and disease have taken hold across the country. More than 420,000 children have been treated for malnutrition and 1.2 million people have suffered from a cholera epidemic. In total, about 22 million people across Yemen—nearly 80% of the population—are in need of help. Yet the bare statistics cannot convey the enormity of this tragedy. What we are witnessing is a man-made humanitarian catastrophe, inflicted by a conflict that has raged for too long.

Britain is one of the biggest donors of emergency aid, providing £170 million of help to Yemen this year, which brings our total support to £570 million since 2015. But the only solution is for all the parties to set aside their arms, cease missile and air attacks on populated areas and pursue a peaceful political settlement. Last week, I conveyed this message to the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which lead the coalition fighting to restore Yemen’s legitimate Government, when I visited both countries. On Monday, I said the same in Tehran to the Foreign Minister of Iran, which backs the Houthi rebels.

On the same day, I instructed our mission at the United Nations to circulate a draft resolution to the Security Council urging a “durable cessation of hostilities” throughout Hodeidah province and calling on the parties to “cease all attacks on densely populated civilian areas across Yemen”.

This draft resolution also requires the unhindered flow of food and medicine, and all other forms of aid, “across the country”. The aim of this UK-sponsored resolution is to relieve the immediate humanitarian crisis and maximise the chances of achieving a political settlement. Martin Griffiths, the UN envoy, is planning to gather all the parties for peace talks in Sweden in the next few weeks.

Amid this tragedy, the House will have noticed some encouraging signs. Last week, Saudi Arabia and the UAE paused their operation in Hodeidah, although there was a further outbreak of fighting yesterday. The Houthi rebels have publicly promised to cease their missile attacks on Saudi Arabia. Martin Griffiths is meeting all parties as he prepares the ground for the talks in Sweden.

Britain holds a unique position as the pen holder for Yemen in the Security Council, a leading humanitarian donor and a country with significant influence in the region, so we will make every effort, and use all the diplomatic assets at our command, to support the UN envoy as he seeks to resolve a crisis that has inflicted such terrible suffering.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. It is only right that all of us from across the House who have been urging the Government for more than two years to table a ceasefire resolution on Yemen have a chance to discuss the draft that will finally go before the UN tomorrow.

I applaud the Foreign Secretary for the fresh impetus that he has brought to the process, just as he has in recent days to the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. There have been other factors at play: the appalling bus bombings in August; the famine faced by 14 million Yemeni citizens; the murder of Jamal Khashoggi; the rising tide of public anger at the war; and the news today that at least 85,000 children have died of hunger and disease since the war began. Unlike his predecessor, this Foreign Secretary has not buried his head in the sand. He has listened to the House, and he deserves credit for that.

Even if we have had to wait for a long time—and we have—there is a great deal to welcome in this draft resolution. We all support its key demands: an immediate cessation of hostilities around Hodeidah; urgent and unhindered access for humanitarian relief; all targeting of civilians to stop; compliance by all sides with international humanitarian law; and full co-operation with the UN’s peace envoy. I will write to the Foreign Secretary later with a number of detailed questions about the resolution and ensure that that letter is available to colleagues, but in the brief time I have, I want to ask him three questions.

First, the five key demands that I mentioned were all included in the Government’s draft resolution circulated in October 2016, which frankly gives the lie to every excuse that the House was ever offered about why that draft was dropped. Can the Foreign Secretary explain why we have had two years of inaction, and tell us what has changed and why it has taken so long?

Secondly—this was also a failing of the 2016 draft—can the Foreign Secretary tell us why the latest resolution fails to spell out what compliance with the resolution will be monitored and by whom, and what sanctions will apply to any party that breaches its terms, whether in terms of the ceasefire or the restriction of humanitarian aid?

Finally, and this is my most important point, there is one major change between the new draft resolution and the draft in 2016. While the new resolution refers to violations of international law in Yemen, it proposes no investigation of those crimes, let alone the independent and transparent investigations that we need if all those who are responsible are to be held to account. Can the Foreign Secretary explain that omission? I want to ask him a simple yes-or-no question: was a demand for an independent, transparent investigation into all alleged war crimes in Yemen and full accountability for those responsible, which is not included in the current draft, in the draft that he showed to Crown Prince bin Salman when they met last week in Riyadh?

Mr Hunt: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for the tone of her comments. She is right that this is a humanitarian catastrophe, and what matters in this situation is finding a way forward. I will try hard to answer her questions.
In that context, I went to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran, and in all cases, I had tough messages for the people I was speaking to about the fact that this situation has to change. That is what I am doing. That means getting compromises on all sides to reach agreement. That is what we are doing, and that is the role of this country. We have to be careful not to overestimate our influence, but we should not underestimate it either. We have a vital role, which is to pursue peace, and that is what we are going to do.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): First, I welcome my right hon. Friend’s efforts in the region, most notably in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and, recently, Iran. We are watching the degradation and destruction of a wonderful country and a huge humanitarian tragedy is occurring. I want to praise the work of our UN staff, and particularly the permanent representative, Karen Pierce, for what she has done to bring this resolution forward. May I urge my right hon. Friend to redouble his efforts, although it seems hard to imagine that he could, to get to the talks to Stockholm, to end this tragedy and to persuade our friends that they are making a very serious mistake?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend speaks wisely. Karen Pierce has done a fantastic job at the United Nations, as have our ambassadors on the ground. He is right; the immediate priority is to get these talks to start. We had a false start with the talks that we hoped would happen in Geneva in August. I think there are signs now that both sides are more willing to talk and to engage in discussions.

The message could not be clearer to the participants on all sides. My hon. Friend is right: our allies, the Saudis and Emiratis, have had to receive hard messages from us in the last few days, but the Houthis have also had to receive tough messages. That was why I went to Iran this week, because we must not miss this opportunity.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his recognition of the humanitarian cost and for the tone that he brings to this. The Save the Children report said that 85,000 children under five have starved to death as a direct result of the war in Yemen, with half of the population at risk of famine. I associate myself with the remarks of the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), about the work of UK officials, not least the ambassador, at the UN.

The Foreign Secretary talked about UK aid, and he is right—we recognise the importance of that—but UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia far outstrip our aid. In fact, last year—2017—there was an increase on 2016 in the level of arms sold to Saudi Arabia. There is recognition across the House that this conflict is having an appalling humanitarian cost, and there has been agreement for quite some time that there is no military solution to this conflict. As such, is it not time to turn off the taps of arms sales to Saudi Arabia right now?

**Mr Hunt:** I completely understand why the hon. Gentleman asks that question, but may I gently say to him that if we did as he is proposing, he needs to ask how that would help people who are starving in Yemen today? Their situation is absolutely desperate, but far from helping them, there would have been no visit by
the UK Foreign Secretary to Saudi Arabia last week, no opportunity to have a frank and sometimes difficult conversation with the Crown Prince, no trip to Tehran—because Iran’s reason for talking to us is that we have a relationship with the Saudis—and no support across the table for a Security Council resolution. British influence, far from being able to bring both sides together, would reduce to zero. That is why the right thing for us to do on arms sales is to follow the incredibly strict arms control regime introduced by a Labour Government in 2000—one of the strictest in the world—which has objective measures to make sure that we do not export arms to places where there is a high risk of violations of international humanitarian law.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The urgently needed change of policy, which people across this House have been calling for for more than two years now, on Yemen is greatly to be welcomed, and it coincides with the arrival of the new Foreign Secretary at the Foreign Office. Does he understand that the condemnation of violence and of the horrendous suffering in Yemen must be even-handed if Martin Griffiths and his colleagues are to succeed in negotiating a cessation of warfare and meaningful talks? I say to the Foreign Secretary, with the deepest possible sadness, that it comes to something when Britain lags behind the moral conscience of warfare and meaningful talks? I say to the Foreign Secretary, who said this would be a United Nations resolution telling them, “In two weeks, it’s got to stop.”

Mr Hunt: The right hon. Gentleman has enormous experience, and I think he speaks with enormous wisdom. The first point I would make about what he says is that it is because of those deadlines that have come and gone, and the pledges that have been broken during the tragic three years of this conflict, that we are being very careful in the wording that we put forward now, to try to get a wording that could stick and that could have the support of all sides.

Mr Hunt: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s comments because he has dialogue not only with the Saudis but also with the Houthis. He will understand if I do not spell out to the House what those consequences are. All I can say is that I do not believe that our allies are in any doubt of the extremely high priority that both we and the Americans attach to this, and I think that is very significant.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I want to thank the Foreign Secretary for coming here today and providing such clarity not just about the situation, but about the United Kingdom Government’s commitment to a fair focus in coming to the right outcomes through building trust and confidence. Can he say more, though? We are a great humanitarian leader when it comes to the Yemen crisis. People are dying every day and have been for many years now. How are we mobilising other allies to provide support in the wider context, but also absolutely to break the gridlock on humanitarian aid and assistance?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for her contribution, and I would of course expect her to speak with great knowledge about the humanitarian side of this, given her former role in government. She is absolutely right: what she has said is a priority for us. That is why she has taken on this role, and I would of course expect her to speak with great knowledge about the humanitarian side of this and to bring with her the trust and confidence. Can he say more, though? We are on some measures the third-largest donor to Yemen. Outside the region, we are certainly the second-largest donor to Yemen after the United States—£170 million in the past year—but we cannot do this alone. So one of the things that we are absolutely seeking to unlock is the support from other countries that we desperately need.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am certain that the Foreign Secretary will do his utmost to bring this awful situation to a conclusion—it cannot go on. May I ask him in particular about his visit to Iran and his efforts to get Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe freed? How hopeful is he that some progress will be made in this situation, where a woman who is innocent is still kept in jail?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. I did talk a lot about what was happening in Yemen when I was in Iran, but she is absolutely right to say that I spent a long time on the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I have to answer truthfully: I did not detect any signs of an immediate change in Iran’s position on that case. I have to say very plainly that this is an innocent woman, and she has been separated from her daughter for more than half her daughter’s life. It is an appalling situation, and Iran
cannot but expect, if it continues to detain people to create diplomatic leverage—sadly, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is not the only person in this situation, and Britain is not the only country affected—that there will be very serious consequences if Iran continues to behave this way. We will stop at nothing to make sure that justice is done and that this brave lady is released.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Effective UN action is so often prevented by the deployment of a protected veto on behalf of one or other of the combatants. That will not happen in the case of Yemen, will it?

Mr Hunt: We have to be very clear that that must not happen and should not happen. That is another reason to be very careful with the wording that we are putting forward. What we actually want is a ceasefire, backed up by a UN Security Council resolution that does pass and is respected on the ground. I do not think we can get to that point in the next couple of weeks, but we want to make a step in that direction.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for asking the urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it; otherwise, we would not have been having this discussion. I also thank my right hon. Friend for coming to Paris recently with nine other hon. Members for the first conference of parliamentarians. It is not just our House that is outraged; people in the French Assembly and elsewhere are concerned. My right hon. Friend is right that there has been a change of tone at the top of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, although not in the middle ranks. The Minister for the Middle East has always been a friend of Yemen and we should not forget his contribution.

I say to the Foreign Secretary that fine words are not enough, although he has given them today. If he holds the pens, he has to use them—not just look at them. That means, first, convening a meeting of the Quint—getting together the Foreign Ministers of the countries involved. He can do that; his predecessor was reluctant to do so. Secondly, he must guarantee the Houthis’ safe passage to Sweden. One reason they did not come to Geneva was that they thought they would not get to Sweden. Thirdly, he must remember that every single day more Yemenis die, so we cannot wait even two weeks; we have to do this now. With every single hour of delay, another Yemeni dies. Five Yemeni children die every single day. So, we cannot wait to be nice to people; we need to get on and table the resolution.

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question and welcome the urgency with which he is encouraging the Government to act, because he is absolutely right. He is also right that this is not about words. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State has done an extraordinary job in terms of the patient diplomacy that he has shown over many years. At the United Nations General Assembly in New York, I had a meeting with the Foreign Ministers who are directly involved. I have been pressing them continually, since even before that meeting. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the safe passage of humanitarian aid is essential, but what has been missing up till now is a willingness on all sides to properly engage in talks. I think we have a change now. There is still a long journey ahead, but this is the moment and we have to grasp it.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I warmly welcome the draft resolution and the terrific diplomatic energy that the Foreign Secretary is putting into the issue. It is indeed good news that the Houthis have announced that they will end ballistic missile strikes, but what other reasons does he have for believing that the Iran-backed Houthi militia will come to the negotiating table in good faith?

Mr Hunt: The real issue is a total lack of trust on both sides. The Houthis said that their principal condition for attending the talks was the safe passage of 50 wounded Houthis to Oman for medical treatment. On my visit to Saudi Arabia, it was publicly confirmed that that will happen. I hope they understand that their principal condition has been met; it is important now that they do not add new conditions. Likewise, the Saudis need to recognise that the missiles have stopped coming into Saudi Arabia, and they must not add new conditions at this stage. Then people need to sit down and talk.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I first welcome the Foreign Secretary’s comments about the situation faced by Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, as I am sure all hon. Members do. I also recognise his commitment to a ceasefire that will hold, but can he assure us that the language used will place some accountability on all parties, that there will be independent arbitration and investigation and that there will be meaningful involvement for women, youth and civil society in the peace process?

Mr Hunt: I reassure the hon. Lady that what she is talking about is exactly what Martin Griffiths, the special envoy, envisages. In the end, if we are to have a durable political solution, there must be trust, accountability for what has happened and fair processes in place to make that happen.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Foreign Secretary knows that Her Majesty’s armed forces always act with the highest professionalism and integrity, but how confident is he that when alleged war crimes—breaches of the laws of war, of international humanitarian law and of international law—are investigated in the future, the technical assistance given to the Saudi regime by Her Majesty’s armed forces will not drag them into accusations of complicity in such actions?

Mr Hunt: In this specific case, I reassure my hon. Friend that our armed forces are not involved at an operational level in the activities of the Saudi coalition to the extent that he suggests. Because of our commercial relationship with Saudi Arabia, however, we are very actively monitoring its compliance with international humanitarian law. We have a lot of contact with the Saudis about that and we raise regular concerns when we think things are going wrong.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State are well aware of my long-standing concerns about our policy on Yemen, particularly arms sales, but I want to thank the Foreign Secretary for the personal effort he has put in—by contrast to his predecessor—and to thank the Minister of State for his regular and ongoing conversations. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for the conference he organised in Paris, which I also attended. He gave a clear message to the Houthis and others that they must attend the talks and take part in the process.
Does the Foreign Secretary agree that one of the best things that the coalition could do is to end the bombardment of Hodeidah—there have been indiscriminate attacks in the last few days—as that would provide a good precondition for the talks in Stockholm? Does he also agree that we need to address the issue of safe transport for the Houthi delegation? They made their concerns clear to us: can he assure me that we will do all that we can to ensure that they do not have any excuses not to attend those talks in Sweden?

Mr Hunt: I will always listen to the hon. Gentleman, who is a former humanitarian worker. He is right that safe transport to the talks in Sweden, and the ability to get back to Yemen afterwards, is a big concern of the Houthis. I am confident that we are pretty much there in terms of resolving the issue. He is right to say that the situation is urgent, and we need to listen carefully to Houthis concerns if we are to build up trust on their side to allow them to engage in a way they did not feel able to do in August.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): How confident is the Foreign Secretary that the tough messages he has taken to the region are being listened to, especially in Tehran, given the strongly destabilising effect Iran has in this conflict? While the resolution is incredibly welcome, if it is not complied with, it will not amount to much more than words on a piece of paper that will not save any lives.

Mr Hunt: I hope that it is a little bit more than that. I understand my hon. Friend’s concerns, but the resolution talks about a cessation of hostilities. It is a step short of a ceasefire, but it is something that we hope might happen. To fully answer the previous question and my hon. Friend’s question together, the cessation of the bombing of the civilian areas of Hodeidah is an important part of the equation to build up trust. That can lead to some progress, but we have been disappointed before.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Coming from the city of Birmingham, I can tell the Foreign Secretary that it was particularly chilling to read the report from Save the Children that said that 85,000 children under five have died in the past three years—the equivalent of the entire under-five population of Birmingham. While it is obviously critical to lift the siege on Hodeidah to make sure that much needed humanitarian supplies, including food, get in, is he also aware of the warning from the director of the World Food Programme that even those supplies that get in are often not able to reach those who need them, because food prices have doubled at the same time as incomes have fallen? What can be done to ensure that food gets to the people who need it rather than being stopped by profiteers?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State spoke to David Beasley at the weekend about these issues. In terms of the supply of food, we have been playing our part. On World Food Day, we announced an extra £96.5 million which will help to feed 2.2 million children and to treat 70,000 children in need of medical help. Corruption and similar issues are a big concern, but are made far worse if bombing is actually going on at the time. The first thing that we need to do is to stop the military action and allow some of the normal civilian methods of stopping corruption to be put in place.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend’s efforts to resolve this humanitarian disaster. What further efforts could he make to undermine Iran’s malign influence in Yemen and right across the middle east?

Mr Hunt: This is something I discussed at length with my Iranian counterpart on Monday. This is of course a big issue in terms of the wider issues of the huge proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. I pointed out that as a large regional power, everyone understands Iran is going to expect to have influence in its region. It is the military influence that is concerning people, whether in Yemen, with Hezbollah, in Syria or in Iraq. Until we can find a resolution to that, I do not think we are going to solve the bigger problem.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s direction of travel on Yemen, but the Yemen Data Project recorded 106 air raids in October. Some 60% of them hit civilian infrastructure, including a hospital, a food storage facility, water and electricity sites and civilian transports. How does he expect the Saudis to use the weapons he sold them this month?

Mr Hunt: We expect all arms sales to comply with international humanitarian law. We have processes in place to make sure there are thorough investigations if we think they have not.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I commend the work of the Foreign Secretary on this issue. An early coalition exit from the conflict in Yemen would not end the civil war. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the coalition has prevented an attack on Hodeidah, and that if it withdrew, the many resistance forces would advance and the conflict would become even more bloody? Does he agree that now is the time for British courage?

Mr Hunt: This is absolutely the time for Britain to use its strength and weight in so far as we have it, but I think my hon. Friend is correctly pointing to the complexity of the situation. The whole conflict started with an appalling injustice: the rebel Government, who represent less than 25% of the population, took over the capital Sana’a and ejected a legitimate Government and a president who had been through an election. That is the heart of this conflict. The concern on the coalition side, which is completely legitimate, is that nothing in the peace process ends up legitimising a wholly illegitimate takeover of power.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I join with others in commending the Foreign Secretary and his ministerial team for the fresh impetus with regard to this tragedy, but every single death in Yemen should be shameful for the entire international community. Can the Foreign Secretary tell us what reaction he has had to the draft resolution, which countries are not supporting it, why they are not supporting it, and what they require to enable them to support it?
Mr Hunt: What we are trying to build is a consensus. That means we have people on all sides who dislike elements of what we are proposing, but we are saying that everyone needs to compromise at this moment. What we do not want to do is move away from the core of our resolution, which is to build confidence at this stage that will allow the talks to go ahead at the end of this month. That is the priority.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's initiative. I agree with most, but not all, of the draft resolution. I think what is really important is paragraph 4, section (b), where he has recognised that falling household incomes in Yemen since 2009 have been at the core of this problem in the past and will be at the core of this problem in the future. The fighting is a consequence of falling incomes. We have had seven peace talks and they have all collapsed. This morning, the Houthis said that they will not abide by any UN resolution. If the peace talks collapse in Sweden, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, what happens next?

Mr Hunt: The fighting is both the cause and the consequence of falling household incomes. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to draw attention to that. All I would say is that one of the suggestions in the resolution is to get foreign currency back into Yemen, particularly through the payment of civil servants of the Government of Yemen, so we can start to get some money back into the Yemeni economy. Getting some liquidity into people's pockets is an absolutely key priority.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I commend, as many others have, the work the Foreign Secretary has put in place. I agree entirely with what he says about not wanting to legitimise the original actions of the Houthis that started the conflict. His draft resolution rightly criticises the Houthis by name, but by the same token the Saudi Arabians and UAE are only mentioned in terms of the positive steps they have taken. Across the House, we have been critical of many of the ways the Saudis have conducted this conflict. Can he say why there is not more in the draft resolution about the areas on which the Saudis should rightly be criticised?

Mr Hunt: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that there are plenty of things in the draft resolution that are uncomfortable for the Saudis. In fact, it is not clear at this stage whether they will actually support it. What we have to do is bring both sides to the table. We have to recognise that there was an injustice committed by the Houthis that was the start of this conflict, but we also have to recognise that part of the tragedy has been caused by the repeated failure of the Saudi military to conclude military operations in a short timescale, which is what they have always said they would be able to do.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Given that so many civilians have been killed by bombing from the air by the Saudis, why are we still training Saudi military pilots at RAF Valley?

Mr Hunt: We have a strategic relationship with the Saudis, but we are very, very clear that we are only able to supply them arms and do all the other things that we do with them if we are confident that Saudi Arabia is and will be in compliance with international humanitarian law. We monitor that constantly.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Minister of State is aware of two of my constituency cases: one involving a constituent who is being held in Sana’a; and another involving the daughters of Jackie Morgan, who were kidnapped from Cardiff in 1986 by their father and have been in Yemen ever since. Jackie Morgan’s daughter Safia is a British citizen, as are the grandchildren. Both families feel that the Government have not been doing enough up until now to help them with their cases. I commend the Minister of State for the efforts he has made, but will the Foreign Secretary personally look at these cases, now that there may be a window to do more, to see if he can do more, with his Minister of State, to help these families?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for championing his constituents’ cases. I want to reassure him that the lack of progress we have been able to make is not through a lack of effort or desire on the part of the FCO; it is simply a function of the fact that we cannot get consular staff into Yemen. Our ambassador is based in Riyadh. I met him when I was there last week. As soon as we are able to offer more assistance, we will.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary talks about the need for robust oversight of humanitarian obligations in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. A report by The Sunday Post revealed that 366 war crimes allegations in Yemen have been tabled, but only 79 investigations have been undertaken by the Saudi-led joint incident assessment team. That is a 21% rate. Does the Secretary of State view that as an acceptable rate, particularly as British munitions may have been involved in those incidents?

Mr Hunt: The entire humanitarian situation in Yemen is totally unacceptable. I agree with the hon. Gentleman and the shadow Foreign Secretary that there needs to be full investigation of all crimes that have happened. To do that, however, we need a climate that makes that possible. That is why the peace process is so important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for all his endeavours and for the leadership he has shown so far in his new position. We are very grateful for that. The absence of a peace process in Yemen is worrying. In Northern Ireland, we all know that until peace talks started only then did the fighting stop. There are reports that some 85,000 children in Yemen are dead from malnutrition. Reports in the media this morning—I watched the news before I left my hotel—said that some people were not able to get to where the food was. Will he therefore outline what protocols are in place to ensure that aid is getting to the right places on the ground and to distribution points that people can actually access?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concern. I always listen carefully to him, considering the history of Northern Ireland. The sad truth is that I cannot give him those assurances, because aid is not getting to where it needs to. There are 22 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and only a third of them are getting it at the moment. That is why, as he rightly says, the first step is for the fighting to stop. We need the confidence-building measures to enable that to happen.
Gosport Independent Panel

1.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): In June this year, the Gosport Independent Panel published its report into what happened at Gosport War Memorial Hospital between 1987 and 2001. It found that 456 patients died sooner than they would have done after being given powerful opioid painkillers. As many as 200 other people may have had their lives shortened, but this could not be proved because medical records were missing.

The findings in the Gosport report are truly shocking, and we must not forget that every one of those people was a son or daughter, a mother or father, a sister or brother. I reiterate the profound and unambiguous apology on behalf of the Government and the NHS for the hurt and anguish that the families who lost loved ones have endured. These were not just preventable deaths, but deaths directly caused by the actions of others. The report is a deeply troubling account of people dying at the hands of those who were trusted to care for them. I pay tribute to the courage of the victims’ families and their local MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), in their work for and commitment to justice, between 1998 and 2010, Hampshire Constabulary conducted three separate investigations. None of these investigations led to a prosecution. The panel criticised the police for their failings in the investigations and their failure to get to the truth. Families said that they felt police had not taken their concerns seriously enough or investigated fully. Because of Hampshire police’s failures, a different police force has been brought in. A new, external police team is now independently assessing the evidence to decide whether to launch a full investigation. They must be allowed to complete that process and follow the evidence, so that justice is done. Much has improved in the NHS since the period covered by the panel’s report, but we cannot afford to be complacent. What happened at Gosport is both a warning and a challenge.

Let me turn to the reforms that have been made and the reforms that we plan to make. The Care Quality Commission has been established as an independent body that inspects all hospitals, GP surgeries and care homes to detect failings and identify what needs to be improved. We have set up the National Guardian’s Office to ensure that staff concerns are heard and addressed. Every NHS trust in England now has someone in place whom whistleblowers can speak to in confidence and without fear of being penalised. We have established NHS Improvement—a separate, dedicated organisation—to respond to failings and put things right, and the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch now investigates safety breaches and uses them to learn lessons and spread best practice throughout the NHS.

Those are the reforms that the Government have already made, but we must go further, so motivated by this report we will bring forward new legislation that will compel NHS trusts to report annually on how concerns raised by staff have been addressed; and, we are working with our colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to see how we can strengthen protections for NHS whistleblowers, including changing the law and other options.

First, on justice, between 1998 and 2010, Hampshire Constabulary conducted three separate investigations. None of these investigations led to a prosecution. The panel criticised the police for their failings in the investigations and their failure to get to the truth. Families said that they felt police had not taken their concerns seriously enough or investigated fully. Because of Hampshire police’s failures, a different police force has been brought in. A new, external police team is now independently assessing the evidence to decide whether to launch a full investigation. They must be allowed to complete that process and follow the evidence, so that justice is done. Much has improved in the NHS since the period covered by the panel’s report, but we cannot afford to be complacent. What happened at Gosport is both a warning and a challenge.

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Next is the question of drug prescription. Central to the deaths at Gosport was the prescribing, dispensing and monitoring of controlled drugs. Since the period covered by the report, there have been significant changes in the way that controlled drugs are used and managed and these syringe drivers are no longer in use in the NHS. However, in the light of the panel’s findings, we are further reviewing how we can improve safety.

Further, from April next year, medical examiners will be introduced across England to ensure that every death is scrutinised by either a coroner or a medical examiner. Medical examiners are people bereaved families can talk to about their concerns to ensure that investigations take place when necessary, to help to detect and deter criminal activity and to promote good practice. The new system will be overseen by a new independent national medical examiner and training will take place to ensure a consistency of approach and a record of scrutiny.

The reforms that we have made since Gosport mean that staff can speak up with more confidence and that failings are identified earlier and responded to quicker. The reforms that we are making will mean greater transparency, stricter control of drugs and a full and thorough investigation of every hospital death. Taken together, they mean that warning signs about untypical patterns of death are more likely to be examined at the time, not 25 years later.

However, as well as these policy changes, there is a bigger change, too, which I turn to now. Just as with the reports into Mid Staffs and Morecambe Bay, the Gosport report will echo for years to come, and the culture change that these reports call for is as deep-rooted as it
is vital. There has been a culture change within the NHS since Gosport, but the culture must change further still. One of the most important things that we learnt from the report is that we must create a culture where complaints are listened to and errors are learnt from, and that this must be embedded at every level in the NHS.

What happened at Gosport was not one individual error; it was a systemic failure to respond appropriately to terrible behaviour. To prevent that from happening again, we need to ensure that we respond appropriately to error—openly, honestly, taking concerns and complaints seriously and seeing them as an opportunity to learn and improve, not a need for cover-up and denial. I want to see a culture that starts by listening to patients and their relatives and by empowering staff to speak up. That starts with leaders creating a culture that is focused on learning not blaming—a culture that is less top-down and less hierarchical, with more autonomy for staff, and that is more open to challenge and change. We need to see better leadership at every level in the NHS to create that culture across the NHS.

Today marks an important moment. Lessons have been learned, will be learned and must be applied. The voices of the vulnerable will be heard. Those with the courage to speak up will be celebrated. Leaders must change the culture to learn from errors, and we must redouble our resolve to create a health service that will be a fitting testament to the Gosport patients and their families. I commend this statement to the House.

1.48 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for an advance copy of his statement. I welcome the statement and the tone of his remarks, and I thank him for repeating the unambiguous and clear apology that the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), offered at the Dispatch Box before the summer—it is good to see the previous Secretary of State sitting on the Treasury Bench today.

We welcome the Secretary of State’s apology today. The whole House was shocked when the previous Secretary of State reported the findings of the Gosport inquiry to the House. This Secretary of State is right to remind us that everyone who lost a life was a son or daughter, a mother or father, a sister or brother. As he said, our thoughts are with the families of the 456 patients whose lives were shortened because of what happened at Gosport, and the families of the 200 others who may have suffered—whose lives may have been shortened; because of missing medical records, we will never know for sure. That lingering doubt—never knowing whether they were victims of what happened at Gosport—must be a particularly intolerable burden for those families affected.

Like the Secretary of State, I pay tribute to the victims’ families, who, as he says, have in the face of grief shown immense courage, fortitude and commitment to demand the truth. I think the whole House will pay tribute to them today. I also reiterate our gratitude to the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, for his extraordinary dedication, persistence, compassion and leadership in uncovering this injustice. Finally, I applaud those hon. Members who played a central role in establishing this inquiry, not just the previous Secretary of State, but the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), who in recent years has played an important role in her capacity as a constituency MP.

The Secretary of State is correct to say that lessons must be learned and applied across the whole system. We all understand that in the delivery of healthcare and the practice of medicine, sadly, tragically, things can and do sometimes go wrong, but we also understand, as Bishop Jones said in his report, that “the handing over of a loved one to a hospital, to doctors and nurses is an act of trust”, but that that trust was “betrayed.”

I still believe that that betrayal was unforgivable. Patient safety must always be the priority, so when there are systemic failures, it is our duty to act, learn lessons and change policies.

I wish to respond to the Secretary of State’s announcements today. We welcome his commitment to legislation placing more transparency duties on trusts, and we will engage constructively with that legislation. Is it his intention to bring forward amendments to the Health Service Safety Investigations Bill, and if so when, or should we expect a new bill altogether? We look forward to his proposals on strengthening protection for whistleblowers, but he will know that the NHS has just spent £700,000 contesting the case of whistleblower Dr Chris Day, a junior doctor who raised safety concerns. He will also be aware of the British Medical Association survey showing that not even half of doctors feel they would have the confidence to raise concerns about safety. Moreover, he will be aware of how Dr Bawa-Garba’s case played out, with her personal reflections effectively used in evidence against her. Can he offer more details on how he will change the climate in the NHS so that clinicians feel they can speak out without being penalised?

I welcome the thrust of the Secretary of State’s remarks on medical examiners, and I agree they are a crucial reform, but can he offer us some more details? Is it still the Government’s intention that they will be employed directly by acute trusts? He will be aware that this has provoked questions about their independence. We would urge him to go further and base them in local authorities and extend their remit to primary care, nursing homes and mental health and community health trusts. If legislation is needed, we would work constructively with him.

We welcome the review into improving safety when prescribing and dispensing medicine. Clearly, one of the first questions that comes to mind when reading the Gosport report is: how were these prescriptions monitored? The Government’s own research indicates that more than 230 million medication errors take place a year, and it has been estimated that these errors and mix-ups could contribute to as many as 22,000 deaths a year, so this review is clearly urgent. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether it will be an independent review, who will be a part of it and what it will cover? We also need to know whether it will be an independent review, what its terms of reference will be, who will be involved and what it will cover.

Finally, patient safety is compromised when staff are overworked and overburdened with pressures. He will know that we have over 100,000 staff vacancies across the NHS. Some trusts are proposing closing A&E departments overnight because they do not have the staff, and some are even proposing closing chemotherapy wards because they believe that the lack of staffing
means services are unsafe. How does the Secretary of State plan to recruit the staff our NHS desperately needs to provide the level of safe care patients deserve?

In conclusion, I offer to work constructively with the Secretary of State to improve patient safety across the NHS, and we support his statement today.

Matt Hancock: I appreciate the tone of the hon. Gentleman, who rightly focuses on the need to ensure that this never happens again, and I join him in thanking Bishop James Jones for his work on this and other inquiries. It was quite brilliant empathetic work. I also thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), for whom I have an awful lot of respect.

The core of the questions the hon. Gentleman raises, about the need to ensure that whistleblowers are listened to and that people are heard in the NHS, comes down to culture change. A whole series of policies underpins that culture change, and I will come to them, but ultimately it comes down to this: errors happen in medicine— it is a high-risk business—but what matters is behaviour, that everything is done to minimise errors and, when they are made, to learn from them, rather than try to cover them up. The culture change needs to be driven across the NHS. It has changed and improved in many areas, but there is still much more to do.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether amendments would be tabled to the Health Service Safety Investigations Bill or in separate legislation on whistleblowers. We are looking at both options. Partly it comes down to the technicalities of scope and the exact distinction and definition of the amendments, but I look forward to working with him on that legislation.

The hon. Gentleman asked why gagging clauses are still in use. I may well ask the very same question. They were deemed unacceptable by my predecessor—I join in the tributes to him—who did so much on this agenda. Gagging clauses have been unacceptable in the NHS since 2013. Trusts, which are independent, can legally use them, but I find them unacceptable, and I will do what it takes to stamp them out.

The hon. Gentleman said that too many people in the NHS feel unable to speak up. To ensure a route for this, we now have, in every single NHS trust, an individual NHS feel unable to speak up. To ensure a route for this, we now have, in every single NHS trust, an individual

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s attendance at our event yesterday, when we discussed the need for a just and learning culture in the NHS. Obviously, he heard the stories that were related during the event: stories of patients who had lost their lives, and families who have ended up spending their entire lives fighting for justice or change, so they have suffered over and above their bereavement. Staff were obviously not listened to. One witness compared a whistleblower with someone reporting to the police, or a state witness, and pointed out how shocked we would be if the police tried to shut that case up. Whistleblowers should be welcomed as people giving evidence against wrongdoing or failure.

I particularly welcomed the Secretary of State’s comment about reform of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, which I think needs to be replaced. I think we need legislation that gives definite protection to people who come forward. As one who has been a clinician for more than 30 years, I can tell the Secretary of State that the long trail of clinicians who have reported concerns and then had their careers ended lies there like a threat to every whistleblower who thinks of speaking up.

If patient safety and the ability of people to speak up in safety are not enshrined in the NHS, we are all under threat. I am sure that not just the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) but Members in all parts of the House would work with the Secretary of State to reform the legislation here and inspire the culture change that is needed in the NHS itself. I certainly would.

Matt Hancock: I agree with an awful lot of what the hon. Lady has said, and I appreciate the wisdom that she brings to this issue with her clinical experience.
The need for a just culture in the NHS is very clear, and the Gosport report makes it clearer still. A just culture means that, yes, there is accountability, but the accountability is established with the intent that the system will improve and people will learn; that people can come forward with concerns rather than covering them up; and that when concerns are expressed, they are welcomed.

I am also pleased about the hon. Lady’s attitude to potential legislation. I look forward to working with her, and, indeed, learning from some of the improvements that have been made in Scotland, to try to ensure that we can get this right.

**Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** The events at Gosport are of substantial interest to my constituents in Havant and across the Solent region. I agree with the Secretary of State that lessons must be not only learned but applied. Will he confirm that ensuring patients’ safety will remain at the heart of all that the NHS does, including the development of its new 10-year plan, and will he confirm in particular that better medical records can be produced through, for instance, the use of new technologies?

**Matt Hancock:** Absolutely, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work. People from across the country, and certainly from across the region, were affected by this. The need for better medical records is underlined in the report. In the case of several hundred people, we do not know whether their lives were shortened or not. Of course technology has a huge part to play in this. From about 15 years ago onwards it is highly unlikely that medical records would have been lost or misplaced in this way, and therefore new technology has a role to play, but it needs to be improved so that access to those records can be made available to the right people at the right time.

**Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD):** I welcome the ambition in the statement for the culture change that is clearly still needed in the NHS. This is the most extraordinary scandal. The Secretary of State is right to highlight the extent to which loved ones were patronised and ignored and staff were often crushed, and how that facilitated the ongoing scandal at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. Clearly, the pursuit of justice is the most pressing priority for the relatives, given how long delayed that is, but may I specifically highlight the Secretary of State’s reference to working with the Business Secretary to establish whether reforms to the legislation are necessary? Does he agree that reformed legislation that allows staff to feel able to speak out—not just in the NHS, but in any occupation—can facilitate the very culture change that he needs so much?

**Matt Hancock:** Yes. I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman’s work, especially as a Minister in the Department, to make sure that people got to the bottom of this and that the truth was published and brought out in the way that it has been. He is right about the question of justice, but it is currently—rightly—a matter for the police, so I will go no further than that.

I strongly agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the legislative framework that we set here in Parliament leads to and underpins the culture that is critical. That is, of course, a matter for the whistleblowing legislation. There are also questions of legal liability. As the right hon. Gentleman well knows, often what patients who have been wronged—or the families of patients who have been wronged—want most of all is an apology, an explanation and a commitment that others will not be affected because the lessons will be learnt. Too often what has been offered instead is the phone number of a no-win, no-fee lawyer, and that is not the way to solve this problem.

**Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con):** I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement and his plain and self-evident commitment to learning from this episode and righting the wrongs. The findings of the report are shocking and heartbreaking, and they affect some of my constituents whose families have suffered so much grief because of the life-shortening policy employed at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. Many of them still have questions many years on, about such matters as criminal investigations. I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement that an external police team will be carrying out an investigation on whether to press charges, but can he provide some guidance on the timeline and whether the police can realistically expect justice to be done, and seen to be done, through the criminal courts?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend is right. The grief over the loss of a loved one whose life has been foreshortened is compounded if that is not acknowledged by the authorities, and we therefore acknowledge it once again today. As for the police investigation, the timings are of course a matter for the police themselves, who are rightly independent. The process currently under way is the reviewing of all the evidence to establish what and whether prosecutions should be brought forward. That will continue into the new year, and the police will then make a statement on the next stages of their investigation.

**Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** On 10 October, my constituent Bridget Reeves submitted a petition with more than 100,000 signatures to the Government to trigger a parliamentary debate. Today is the anniversary of her grandmother Elsie Devine’s death at Gosport War Memorial Hospital. She died after concerns had emerged from staff at the hospital.

I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for his commitment to addressing many of the problems that have already been identified and are emerging from the various inquiries. The families want justice, among other things, but they will not get it until the outcome of the fourth police investigation—and I welcome the fact that it is being carried out by a different police authority.

I have two questions. First, will the Secretary of State meet the families face to face? Secondly, while I acknowledge his points about concerns of culture in the NHS, I am concerned about the culture in the coroner service, in relation to not just this case but others, including one that I met constituents to discuss this morning. There is a governance issue relating to when the coroner service needs investigating in the case of some inquests. Will the Secretary of State work with the Attorney General and pick up the concerns that Members expressed about a number of inquests?

**Matt Hancock:** The point about coroners is a matter for the Ministry of Justice, but I am pleased to see that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend...
the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) is present. He would delighted to meet the hon. Lady to take up that point—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar) indicated assent.

Matt Hancock: Yes: good.

I will, of course, be happy to meet the families, but the advice of Bishop James Jones is that that will be appropriate after this stage of the police investigation. I wrote to the families to explain the position before making my statement. It is important that we go through the process properly during the police investigation to ensure that justice can be done, but I shall be more than happy to meet the families at the appropriate moment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I always listen to all of my colleagues with equal doses of respect and affection, but I am moved to observe as we approach the festive season that it would probably be a good idea for the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) to send copies of his textbook on succinct questions as Christmas presents to all colleagues.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I join the cross-party support for my right hon. Friend’s statement and add my voice in commending the dedication and commitment of Bishop James Jones, who, I am pleased to say, is I think in the Chamber listening to the Government response to his report. I am a great supporter of the National Guardian’s Office and the “freedom to speak up” guardians; in fact I am such a strong supporter that I wear its lanyard around my neck and have done ever since I was in the Health Department. But a number of people who make complaints either do not yet have sufficient confidence in these guardians or feel that their complaints are not properly addressed. There are however good examples of best practice, where some chief executives of trusts have a regular, routine meeting with guardians to make sure that complaints are brought directly to their attention. Will my right hon. Friend work with the senior leaders across the NHS and the National Guardian’s Office to ensure that best practice is used so we can give the most possible confidence to people with concerns about safety?

Matt Hancock: Yes: absolutely I am happy to do that, and I am happy to commend my hon. Friend’s lanyard, too. Ultimately culture change and having a good culture comes down to the leadership within the NHS and individual trusts. It has struck me in the four months that I have been doing this job that the trusts that have the best results in terms of outcomes for patients, waiting times and waiting lists and finances are also those that are hot on this subject; they listen to complaints and act on them, because they know that that is the way to improve their organisation. I want to see that sort of best practice right across the board.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): Like colleagues, I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. It was my constituent Gillian Mackenzie 21 years ago who was the first relative to raise concerns, and she has been battling ever since. She came to me 11 years ago and it was with pleasure that I introduced her and the other families to my colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). I am grateful for the changes in the health service that will hopefully prevent any such dreadful and shocking episode from happening again.

I must bring the Secretary of State back to the justice issue, however, as it is very important. I appreciate that it concerns a different Department, but the Secretary of State said in his statement that the police “must be allowed to complete that process and follow the evidence, so that justice is done.”

A few weeks ago I had a constructive meeting with Assistant Chief Constable Downing, who is in charge of that. I would like a commitment from the Government that there will be sufficient funding for the full assessment, and, if it goes to investigation, sufficient funding in the budget for a proper investigation to be done so that relatives can get the justice they have been denied for so long.

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course that is the Government’s position, and I am very happy to reiterate it today. The police need to be able to follow the evidence without fear or favour.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I declare an interest as a registered nurse and someone who has worked in areas using syringe drivers and controlled drugs. I welcome the measures announced today, but may I make two further suggestions? First, there are very strict guidelines for nurses on controlling the stock of controlled drugs, and wrongdoing is picked up very quickly. There is not, however, enough training in the use, the dosage, the method and the route of controlled drugs that would give nurses confidence to speak up. Secondly, this situation could have been picked up much sooner if we had a proper IT system that shares medical notes between hospitals and doctors.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is right on both points, and I am very happy to work with her on them. On the latter point, there is still much more work to do to have a system that is fully interoperable between secondary and primary care. As she says, many patients’ GPs might have picked up on the unusual patterns if they had had access to hospital notes. That now does happen in a small number of hospitals, but it is central to improving the technological capability of the NHS.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and his overall approach on patient safety. We have talked a lot about the need to change the culture from one of blame to one of accountability and transparency. That is easy to say, but difficult to implement so, as well as the changes to the annual report and procedures and process changes, will there be additional training and practical support that can help embed this new culture?

Matt Hancock: Training has improved over the last couple of decades. The training programmes are independently devised for doctors by the royal colleges and are developed and implemented with the General Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council.
There is still much to do to drive through the modern culture of inclusivity and bringing in ideas from all places and to remove some of the unnecessary hierarchies in the world of medicine, both within the NHS and without. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend on that.

Finally, may I end by saying that there is still work to do, not least on the judicial element, and all of us should thank Bishop James Jones for how he has handled this process and made sure that people feel that justice can be done and that the learnings can be taken?

BILL PRESENTED

PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD (RECOGNITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran, supported by Richard Burden, Sir Vince Cable, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Tim Farron, Wera Hobhouse, Ben Lake, Norman Lamb, Stephen Lloyd, Caroline Lucas, Jess Phillips and Dr Philippa Whitford, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the recognition of the State of Palestine.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 February 2019, and to be printed (Bill 295).

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Consent)

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

2.16 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the person registering a marriage or civil partnership to attest the valid consent of both parties to the marriage or civil partnership before it is solemnized; and for connected purposes.

Last year, a constituent of mine, Daphne Franks, came to my advice surgery on a Saturday morning to tell me the horrifying story of her mother, Joan Blass. It was a story that I could hardly believe was possible in modern Britain, and it showed clearly that our marriage laws are sadly deficient in one important aspect, which has provided the reason for my Bill.

Born in April 1924 and widowed in 2008, Joan Blass lived next door to her daughter in the Gledhow district of my Leeds North East constituency. Towards the end of 2011, Joan was working in her garden one afternoon when she met Colman Folan, who struck up a conversation with her while she was standing at the gate from her garden to the street. She invited Mr Folan into her home for a cup of tea, and within one month of their first meeting, Colman Folan had moved into Joan’s house, taking up residence in her spare bedroom.

Joan had been diagnosed with vascular dementia in early 2011. At first it appeared that Colman was looking after her very well, although he seemed to be rather controlling and secretive. He also became increasingly hostile towards her family. He began to take Joan to visit her friends, as well as some relatives, all over the country, and in 2015, he and Joan flew to Budapest, even though by this time she was getting very frail and travelling made her stressed and exhausted. For the 10 days that they were away, Daphne, her daughter, had no idea where she was.

Sadly, on 26 March 2016, Joan Blass died of cancer, not long before her 92nd birthday. When her daughter saw her shortly after her death, she was still wearing her first husband’s wedding ring, but three days after her mother’s death, Daphne discovered that Colman and Joan had been married in a civil ceremony at Leeds town hall on 26 October 2015.

Hon. Members may imagine what a shock that discovery was to Daphne, her brother and the rest of Joan’s family. At the time of the marriage, Joan was 91 and Colman was 67. No family member or friend had been told about the secret marriage ceremony.

Daphne asked her solicitor and the police for help. She recalled that Colman had stopped even communicating with her or any other family member in 2014, for no obvious reason. Although Daphne continued to see her mother every day in her home, she always felt a little frightened of Colman.

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Hon. Members may imagine what a shock that discovery was to Daphne, her brother and the rest of Joan’s family. At the time of the marriage, Joan was 91 and Colman was 67. No family member or friend had been told about the secret marriage ceremony.

Daphne asked her solicitor and the police for help. She recalled that Colman had stopped even communicating with her or any other family member in 2014, for no obvious reason. Although Daphne continued to see her mother every day in her home, she always felt a little frightened of Colman.

Joan had made a will some years before meeting Colman, but Daphne discovered, to her surprise and shock, that a marriage automatically revokes a previous will. Colman now had complete control over Joan’s estate, in spite of the fact that Daphne had previously had power of attorney on behalf of her mother during her lifetime. The solicitor advised the family that it was
almost impossible to annul a marriage after death and that the only ground on which the marriage could be annulled would be if it could be proved that either partner had a lack of capacity to make a free and rational decision to marry. Unfortunately, no such evidence existed.

Further pain was caused to Joan’s family after her funeral wishes were denied by Colman. Joan had always made it clear that she did not wish to be buried, yet Colman insisted on it. The family’s solicitor advised that a single day’s hearing at the Leeds division of the High Court would settle the matter in Joan’s and the family’s favour, upholding the wishes of the deceased. However, after a four-day hearing that cost the family all their savings and assets—more than £200,000—the judge ruled in Colman’s favour because Joan had never written down her wishes. Furthermore, even if it had been possible to annul the marriage, an annulled marriage cannot overturn the revocation of a will through marriage. Parties in a marriage must understand the financial consequences of entering into that marriage, as we see in the Court of Protection judgment in E.J. v. S.D. in 2017.

I am presenting my Bill in an attempt to close some of the loopholes in the statutes governing marriage in this country. It is not good enough for a registrar to say that simply because one of the participants in a marriage ceremony was smiling at the time, consent was happily given. Much of the anecdotal evidence suggests that Joan had no idea she had ever been married to Folan, and there was clear evidence that her mental capacity was severely reduced in the last years of her life. However, there is no requirement for registrars to ensure that both parties in a marriage are aware of what they are doing when they enter into a contract to be married. There are protections under the law to prevent marriage under duress, but believing that duress is not present simply because one of the parties looks content does not mean that there is the mental capacity for consent.

My Bill would establish a number of improvements and protections against what I would call predatory marriage—a term already in circulation in Canada and now used by Joan’s family. First, the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Consent) Bill would establish that marriage should no longer revoke a previous will in every case—or, indeed, in any case. The majority of those affected are entering into second marriages and are from the older generation. Secondly, the Bill would establish that there should be better training for registrars to ensure that robust procedures for safeguarding vulnerable individuals are put in place. Mark Thomson, the Registrar General for England and Wales, has said that he wants to “modernise” registration procedures.

Thirdly, the Bill proposes that capacity to marry should be established via a simple questionnaire to alert registrars that an assessment of capacity may be needed before the ceremony is carried out and that a medical capacity assessment may also be required. Simply smiling during a marriage ceremony should not be assumed to mean consent if there is no mental capacity to make such a decision in the first place. Fourthly, the Bill proposes that notices of intention of a marriage should be published on the internet so that families such as Daphne’s can discover much sooner that a marriage has taken place, or is to take place, even if their presence is not requested or wanted.

I would like to thank Daphne and Stephen Franks for bringing their very distressing case to my attention as their local Member of Parliament. I believe that the case has profound implications for many hundreds of other families across the country who may find themselves in a similar situation, and of course it goes without saying that this could affect many other Members. I would also like to thank Sarah Young, a solicitor and partner in the firm of Ridley & Hall in Leeds, who has specialised in marriage law, for her help and advice in bringing this to the attention of hon. Members, including, I hope, members of the Government and my colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Fabian Hamilton, Rachel Reeves, Alex Sobel, Tracey Crouch, Alec Shelbrooke, Preet Kaur Gill, Caroline Lucas, Sir Edward Davey, Karen Lee and Richard Burden present the Bill.

Fabian Hamilton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 296).
Fisheries Bill

Second Reading

2.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to introduce the Second Reading of the Fisheries Bill under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I may, I should like to begin my introduction of this legislation on a personal note. My father was a fish merchant, and my family have made their living from the sea for generations. That has given me a deep personal appreciation of the risks and sacrifices undertaken by those who go to sea to ensure that we have healthy and nutritious food. There are Members of this House who know those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to provide us with the food that we enjoy, and I would like to say that those who work so hard and take such risks to bring us the bounty of the sea will be first and foremost in my mind in our deliberations today. We are in all their debt.

I want to underline the fact that I am deeply grateful to the team at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for the work they have done on the preparation of the White Paper that preceded this Bill, as well as on the Bill, the explanatory memorandum and everything that goes with them. DEFRA has some of the finest civil servants in the Government, but the fisheries team stand out. They are men and women of dedication, deep knowledge and commitment, and I am grateful to them, as I am also to my predecessors in this role as Secretary of State. Every single one of my predecessors has sought to do their best for the fishing industry, and it would be invidious to single any of them out. However, I want to pay a special tribute to three ministerial or ex-ministerial colleagues. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) has done an enormous amount to champion the common fisheries policy while we have been in it. And the Minister for Newbury (Richard Benyon) has done an enormous amount to improve the operation of the common fisheries policy while we have been in it. And the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), has been an outstanding negotiator on Britain’s behalf, and in his time in office—which I hope will continue for many years to come—he has done an enormous amount for coastal communities across the country.

One of the pleasures in bringing forward the Bill is to be able to acknowledge that, whatever position individuals may have taken in the referendum on our membership of the European Union, there is a widespread recognition across the House that the common fisheries policy did damage. It did environmental damage to fish stocks and to our marine environment. It also did economic damage to the fishing industry, which has been such a critical part of this country’s heritage and which can again become a vital part of our economic future. The common fisheries policy did social damage as well, because coastal communities suffered. Their economies were hollowed out and businesses collapsed as a result of its operation. Whatever position we may have taken in that referendum, taking back control of our waters, leaving the common fisheries policy and once again becoming an independent coastal state will give us an opportunity to lead environmentally, to revive the fishing industry economically and to ensure that our coastal communities once more have the opportunity for a renaissance.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I agree with the Secretary of State, on behalf of the Scottish National party, about the damage the CFP did. However, the political text on the withdrawal agreement states that there will be: “Cooperation...internationally to ensure fishing at sustainable levels, promote resource conservation...the development of measures for the conservation, rational management and regulation of fisheries...a new fisheries agreement on, inter alia, access to waters and quota shares” and so on. That is the current form, in black and white. Although that might mean something new and better, is it not the case that, given the UK’s negotiating failures so far, what we will end up with will look very similar to the terms of the CFP?

Michael Gove: No, not at all. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, for whom I have enormous respect, for acknowledging many of the defects and flaws in the common fisheries policy, but we have been clear—this is reflected in both the draft withdrawal agreement and the accompanying draft political declaration on our future economic partnership—that we will be negotiating at the December 2020 Fisheries Council as an independent coastal state, ready to ensure that we decide on access to our waters, that we decide on total allowable catches and that we decide on quotas, and it is on that basis that we can ensure that the interests of our coastal communities are respected.

Of course, as an independent coastal state, we will be governed by the United Nations convention on the law of the sea. That landmark piece of international law makes it clear that all independent coastal states will negotiate with their neighbours to ensure that the environmental health of fish stocks are preserved and that an equitable share of each nation’s bounty can be agreed, because we as a nation depend for the fish we eat not just on the fish in our waters—of course, we have the healthiest stocks of any country in the existing European Union—but on negotiating with other independent coastal states, including Norway, the Faroes, Iceland and others, to ensure that we get the mix of fish that consumers demand and that society has a right to expect.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that any party represented in this Chamber that promotes continued membership of the European Union is letting our fishermen down, because it is already promoting continued membership of the common fisheries policy?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend knows what she is talking about, and she is absolutely right. The Scottish National party wants us to stay in the European Union, and therefore in the common fisheries policy, and the Scottish National party’s MEPs, when given the chance to vote in the European Parliament, voted to stay in the common fisheries policy. However, I do want to acknowledge that there are independent members of the SNP who do not toe the line of their leadership. There are individual voters who have lent the SNP their...
votes in the past but who do not agree with that view. Also, to be fair, the Scottish Government and the Minister responsible, Fergus Ewing, in helping to ensure that this legislation can work for Scotland, have operated in a constructive manner, as indeed have officials in the devolved Administrations—sadly, we do not have the Executive in Northern Ireland, but the officials there have negotiated in good faith, as have the Labour Administration in Cardiff. I want to underline that the legislation we bring forward will see powers moving to the devolved Administrations. It will be a diffusion of power and a strengthening of devolution.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Many individuals and organisations campaigned very hard to get the firmest rules on sustainability as part of reform of the common fisheries policy. Will my right hon. Friend give them an assurance that any vessel fishing in British waters after we leave the European Union will be required to maintain the highest levels of sustainability for those fish stocks and to work with the Government to do so?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Bill makes it clear that there are principles, to which the Government will be held, that ensure that fishing will be sustainable and that our marine environment will be restored to full health. The Bill will give the Government powers to ensure that no vessel can fish in our waters unless it adheres to those high environmental standards.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State just be absolutely clear about this? At the end of March, we will leave the common fisheries policy, but then we will immediately be back in it, by giving the EU the right to make all decisions for however long the transition goes on. It worries me very much when I hear more and more Ministers talking on the “Today” programme about the transition being extended again and again. Why did he allow the Prime Minister to accept in the withdrawal agreement that fisheries would stay as part of the transition?

Michael Gove: I will give the hon. Lady, for whom I have enormous respect and affection, one piece of perhaps unsolicited advice: I find that in the morning it is better not to listen to the “Today” programme; Radio 3, or even Radio 2, ensures that I have a more equable morning. However, she makes a very important point about the transition period. A number of Members of this House hoped that in the transition period, when it was agreed earlier this year, the common fisheries policy would be outside, but there is one very significant departure from the overall transition period, which applies to the common fisheries policy, which is that the European Union acknowledged that from 2021 we will be an independent coastal state. Therefore, when we negotiate in the December 2020 Fisheries Council, although we will still legally be a member of the European Union, we will be negotiating then as an independent coastal state. That is why I said at the time that we need to keep our eyes on the prize of making sure that after that transition period we can have all the opportunities to do the right thing environmentally, economically and socially, as I mentioned earlier.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I would like to take as many interventions as possible, in fairness to all those Members who necessarily cannot stay for the duration of the debate.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): A moment ago, the Secretary of State offered the House some warm words about his commitment to sustainability. Could he therefore explain why the Bill contains only one vague mention of maximum sustainable yields? Can he give us a guarantee that, under his new vision for fisheries management, we will adhere to maximum sustainable yields and to scientific advice, as opposed to what we have done for years and years, which is to allow total catches to exceed those sustainable yields by up to 50%?

Michael Gove: The short answer is yes.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way on that point, because it is germane to the point about co-operation with our neighbouring states and the implications arising from the transitional arrangements. Can he tell the House how the EU-Norway-Faroes mackerel deal, which is currently up for renegotiation and renewal in 2020, will be handled in practical terms, and what his Government are doing to ensure that the voice of our fishermen is heard in that important negotiation?

Michael Gove: We will be taking part in bilateral and multilateral negotiations in the run-up to December 2020, in anticipation of being, as I have said, a fully independent coastal state from January 2021. We will be negotiating with all our neighbours to ensure that we get the very best deal for our fishermen. On the right hon. Gentleman’s second point, which was very fair, about collaboration with fishing organisations, in preparing the Bill we have worked with the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations and a variety of other producer organisations, and every single one of them has said that it wants to see the Bill on the statute book. Of course there will be debate in Committee, and there may well be amendments that can refine and improve what we want to do, but there is not a single representative organisation that speaks for the fisheries industry or for fish processors anywhere that does not want to see the Bill on the statute book as quickly as possible.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The one fly in the ointment is, of course, the elephant in the room: the withdrawal deal that the Prime Minister has produced in recent weeks. Can the Secretary of State confirm that article 6(2) of the protocol relating to Northern Ireland could be interpreted to read that every EU fisheries regulation in existence will continue to be applied to Northern Ireland fishermen alone if the backstop is applied?

Michael Gove: I do not believe that is the right interpretation. I do recognise that a number of colleagues across the House have concerns about the backstop arrangement, but let me underline one point. Under the backstop arrangement, were it ever to come into place, the United Kingdom would be an independent coastal
state. Some people have read the withdrawal agreement and taken it to mean that somehow the common fisheries policy would be extended if the backstop were to come into operation and that we would not have control over our territorial waters and our exclusive economic zone. That is not the case. Even in the event of the backstop coming into operation, we will be an independent coastal state, and fishermen, whether they are in Northern Ireland or anywhere else in the United Kingdom, will be able to take advantage of the additional fishing opportunities that arise as a result.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is the Secretary of State aware that article 6(2) of the Northern Ireland protocol enables vessels registered in Northern Ireland, but not vessels registered anywhere else in the United Kingdom, to sell their goods into the European Union tariff free? Does he therefore accept that vessels registered in Scotland, and indeed in the rest of the UK, will be at a competitive disadvantage when that part of the backstop comes into force, which, incidentally, under article 154 will be immediately?

Michael Gove: The hon. and learned Lady draws attention to an important point. On the backstop, as the House will hear at other points, there are some who argue that Northern Ireland is placed at a competitive advantage compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, and there are some who argue that Northern Ireland is disadvantaged relative to other parts of the United Kingdom. One thing that is clear, however, is that Northern Ireland—an integral and valued part of the United Kingdom—when we leave the European Union, will leave alongside the rest of the United Kingdom and be part of one independent coastal state that is capable of taking advantage of all these fisheries opportunities.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give us some idea of his ambition for after we leave the common fisheries policy? It seems to me that we could have a big expansion of our domestic fishing industry, with a lot more fish landed and a big increase in fish processing in the UK. Is that his ambition, and how big will it be?

Michael Gove: A whopper, I am tempted to say. My right hon. Friend is right. Even the Scottish Government acknowledge that there could be a £1 billion bonanza for the United Kingdom if we manage fish stocks effectively. That makes it all the more surprising, when the analysis of the Scottish Government’s own statisticians has the bonanza at that level, that Scottish National party politicians in Europe and elsewhere are standing in the way of our leaving the common fisheries policy, in stark contrast to Scottish Conservatives.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: I am very happy to give way to a distinguished English Conservative.

Richard Drax: If the backstop is not implemented but the implementation period is extended, can the Secretary of State confirm that that would mean we have to remain in the CFP beyond the 21 months? Is he aware—perhaps he can reassure the House—that the French are circling, as we all expect them to do, with Sabine Weyand saying that the British “would have to swallow a link between access to products and fisheries in future agreements”?

Michael Gove: I note the reporting of what Ms Sabine Weyand said. One of the interesting things—again, I alluded to this earlier—is that different Members will have different assessments of the advantages and disadvantages that lie within the draft withdrawal agreement, but it is instructive that the negotiator on behalf of the European Commission, Ms Weyand, felt that she had to sweeten the pill, particularly on fisheries, to get EU nations to sign, because there is an acknowledgment on the part of EU nations that UK negotiators have safeguarded access to our waters and secured our status as an independent coastal state. The initial negotiating mandate of the European Union has not been satisfied in these negotiations with respect to fisheries, but the red lines laid down by our Prime Minister have been defended. It is absolutely critical, without prejudice to any other conversations, to acknowledge that.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On the powers of the devolved nations, the Secretary of State said during the Vote Leave campaign that one of the Brexit dividends is that immigration powers could be devolved to Scotland. Immigration is crucial to the seafood processing industry and to the fishing boats, particularly on the west coast of Scotland. Does he agree that Scotland should get control of immigration so we can manage our fishing industry?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am grateful to those who work in the fish processing industry, and indeed to those who work offshore, who come from across the world, and not just from European economic area nations, to help ensure that industry is strong. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made it clear that our post-Brexit immigration policy will be truly global in scope and focused on making sure this country is an economic success, emphasising that we have taken back control.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the red lines. The Prime Minister has told the House on numerous occasions that we will leave the customs union, yet the withdrawal agreement clearly envisages that we would remain in the customs union under the backstop and that, having entered, we could not leave unless the EU consented—the so-called “Hotel California” arrangement. The Prime Minister has also assured the House in very strong terms that she would never contemplate a border down the Irish sea, yet in the agreement, including the Northern Ireland protocol, exactly that is envisaged. I regret to say that, given that, I find it difficult to take seriously the commitments that the Prime Minister has now given to the House. If I have trouble believing her, why should I believe the Secretary of State?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend, like all hon. Members, must make his own judgment on what he chooses to believe, and on who and what he wishes to support.

Several hon. Members rose—
Michael Gove: I will answer my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) before giving way. We have been told at different times that we will have to bend or buckle when it comes to fisheries. The Prime Minister and the negotiating team have absolutely not bent or buckled, which is why the European Commission’s own negotiator has had to attempt to sweeten the pill.

It will not have escaped my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford that other countries are expressing their dissatisfaction with the withdrawal agreement for precisely that reason. He spent a distinguished time as a Minister and as the Conservative party’s Europe spokesman, and he must know that if other countries are complaining that they have lost out, it is a sign that this country has secured an advantage.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Further to the Secretary of State’s earlier point about expanding fishing opportunities, I am happy to report that Brixham in my constituency has had another record year and in 2017 landed over £40 million-worth of fish, but it is now limited because it is at full stretch. Brixham is anxiously waiting to hear what my right hon. Friend will do to guarantee that it can have access to funds such as the European maritime and fisheries fund to allow it to expand. Brixham is keenly to get on with it.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I congratulate her on championing her constituency so successfully, and I thank the fishermen of Brixham for their work. In the EU we have the EMFF, which provides support for individual fishing communities, and this Bill makes provision for a replacement so that grants and loans can be provided for just such investment.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I want to believe everything the Secretary of State has said, but he will know that the industry has a long memory, and it can remember the last-minute sell-out in the original Common Market negotiations. The industry still fears that is going to happen again. Can he give a categorical answer that under no circumstances will any further concessions be granted?

Michael Gove: I have been very clear about how determined we are to fight on fisheries. We have defended our red lines. My hon. Friend mentions what happened in the 1970s. I was a boy then, but the consequences had a profound impact on my family and on my father’s business. There is no way I can ever forget what happened then, and no way that I will be anything other than a resolute champion for the interests of coastal communities such as the one my hon. Friend serves and represents so admirably.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): According to the withdrawal agreement, we will be in the common fisheries policy until December 2020. Who will represent the UK at the annual Fisheries Council meeting in 2019, after we have left the EU?

Michael Gove: The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice).

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The Secretary of State has been very generous in giving way, but it is important that he is allowed to answer one question before taking another.

Michael Gove: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are right to say that I want to make sure I can answer as many questions as possible, from Members in as many parts of the House as possible, but this is a well subscribed debate and I have been able to make only about two or three of the points I wanted to make while I have been answering questions.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con) rose—

Michael Gove: But because this legislation is so important and because of the passions aroused, I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend.

Mr Walker: I thank the Secretary of State for that. It would be nice if we could talk a little more about fish, and I want to talk briefly about bluefin tuna. For the first time in about 50 or 60 years, these wonderful fish are appearing off the shore of Cornwall and up the west coast. When we have left the EU, will we look at having a recreational catch-and-release fishery for bluefin tuna? If we could discuss that, and if I could bring a delegation to see the Secretary of State to discuss it, I would be extremely grateful, because there is huge commercial and conservational opportunity attached to such a fishery.

Michael Gove: I quite agree and we are actively exploring that. One of the points I was due to make is that recreational fishing is a crucial part of the life of the nation; it provides, through tourism and other expenditure, support for many important parts of our rural and coastal economy.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): A bluefin tuna was washed up on Tolsta beach in Lewis last weekend. I would be happy to join any delegation with the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), because we have the same interests and needs. On the wider point, the Secretary of State mentioned “bend or buckle” a while ago. In the debate on 27 February 2018 in Westminster Hall, an astonishing number of Tory MPs supported this claim:

“ Ideally, at 11 pm on 29 March 2019, we need to have absolute and 100% control of our fisheries, without it being part of any implementation or transition deal.”—[Official Report, 27 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 290WH.]

That was echoed by loads of Tory MPs. Was that bend or was it buckle?

Michael Gove: Interestingly, an extraordinary number of Conservative MPs were in that debate because an extraordinary number of Conservative MPs want the very best for our fishing industry. Scottish Conservative MPs have stood up for coastal communities in a way that the Scottish National party has signally failed to do. I will tell the hon. Gentleman who bent and who buckled. It was the SNP MEPs who bent and buckled in Strasbourg and Brussels when they agreed to keep us imprisoned in the CFP.
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): There are at least 65 co-operatives in the fishing industry, which are worth more than £48 million at the moment. Would not one of the best ways to help boost the fishing co-operatives sector, which keeps profits in hard-pressed coastal communities, be to ensure a radical reform of the quota system, two thirds of which is held by just three opaque companies?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As we leave the CFP, there is an opportunity to reallocate quota. We have already seen a reallocation, with a 13% uplift for the under-10 metre fleet under this Government. There is a crucial point to make: some of the quota that is necessarily allocated is allocated for the types of stocks—pelagic stocks—of which the under-10 metre fleet, simply because of the nature of where those fish are found, would be poorly placed to take advantage. So he is absolutely right to say there is a case for reform, but a significant amount of quota could not, at this stage, be allocated in the way that he might suggest.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am keen to allow my hon. Friend, who has shown remarkable patience, the chance to intervene.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene and not avoiding me altogether. We have talked about a “bonanza” of fish and about recreational fishing, but will he give assurances that we will not bend from our standards on sustainability? After all, we are talking about a wild harvest; fishermen have to make money, but they cannot make it unless the stocks are sustainable. Does he also agree that the Bill has included references to the 25-year environment plan and the nature capital approach and that this is the right way to go, demonstrating that our Government have the environment and sustainability at their heart?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we adhere to the principles behind the maximum sustainable yield. The early clauses in this Bill set out clear principles by which any Secretary of State must be bound in order to put the environment and sustainability first. More than that, as we all know, under the CFP we had policies that put the environment first. Now, as an independent coastal state, we can work with organisations ranging from Greenpeace to Charles Clover’s Blue Marine Foundation to ensure that we have a policy that is right environmentally and right economically.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I am pleased that we are now starting to put the environment first, but almost 80% of the UK fishing fleet is small-scale and it lands only 11% of the fish by value. Given that this fleet is not only more profitable to local economies, but employs more local fishermen and uses more sustainable fishing practices, will the Bill allow larger quotas to independent vessels under 10 metres?

Michael Gove: Absolutely, the Bill explicitly allows us to ensure that new quota can be allocated to the under-10 metre fleet, which exhibits all the virtues that my hon. Friend outlined. As I mentioned in response to the question from the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), it would be inappropriate to transfer some aspects of quota, but it has been the case, not least under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), that we have already been transferring quota to the under-10 metre fleet, for the reasons that my hon. Friend mentions.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way; he is generous with his time. On the comments made by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), the Scottish Conservatives can safely say that they will take no lessons on the CFP from the SNP, who would sell us straight back into it if they had their way of re-entering Europe.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on that. I am tempted to say, because so far we have not had a pun in this debate, that the SNP wants to have its hake and eat it. The truth is that SNP Members pose as defenders of Scotland’s fishing communities, yet all the time we were in the EU scarcely a peep they emitted on behalf of the fishing industry. Now that we are leaving, they still want to tie us to the CFP, because they put the abstract ideology of their separatist sentiment ahead of the real interests of Scotland’s communities, and that is why they were so decisively rejected by Scotland’s coastal communities at the last general election.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): This point has been made, but I will make it again. I have the great honour of representing the fishing village of Mevagissey. The Secretary of State may remember that he promised to come to see the fishermen there—they are still very much looking forward to his visit. That thriving fishing community is made up of under-10 metre vessels. So will he confirm that this Bill will provide opportunities for our under-10 metre fleet to take advantage of the new quota that will be available, so that it can grow, thrive and rebuild the great industry that we have lost?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point, one that was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord)—

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: I am about to use a word that I rarely use, but I am going to use it with greater pleasure than I have ever used it before—no! I am tempted to say: no, nae, never, no more. The one thing I did want to underline is that the under-10 metre fleet, for the reasons outlined before, is a crucial part of the health and vibrancy of coastal communities and of our fishing industry overall. The profitable nature of its enterprise and its commitment to high environmental standards should be emulated by others.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I am going to make a wee bit of progress now, if that is okay. One thing that is clear about this Bill is that it has benefited from the support of the devolved Administrations and of non-governmental
Another point made by several hon. Friends and hon. Members is about the importance of protecting not only diversity at sea but diversity in the fishing industry itself. We need to ensure not only that the pelagic fleets that sail from Peterhead and Fraserburgh have new opportunities, but that those that fish closer to coastal waters—often, the under-10 metre fleets that colleagues have praised—have an opportunity to take advantage of new opportunities. As a result of this legislation, we will have additional quota that we can reallocate in a way that is equitable, fair and sustainable.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Before he moves on, will the Secretary of State give way?

**Michael Gove:** For the hon. Gentleman, yes.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** What do the Secretary of State’s words on bycatch and everything else mean for spurdog bycatchers?

**Michael Gove:** Sorry?

**Angus Brendan MacNeil:** What does it mean for spurdog bycatchers?

**Michael Gove:** It will be easier for those who are responsible for that bycatch to ensure that they can continue to fish in a way that is both environmentally sustainable and economically resilient. I will come back to the hon. Gentleman in due course.

**Owen Smith:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being very generous. I am trying to reconcile two things that he has said: first, that we are going to be more mindful of sustainability, and secondly, that we are going to catch more fish. The total allowable sole catch in the Irish sea is currently set at 40,000, when the scientific advice is that it should be zero. Will we be catching more or fewer sole in the Irish sea under the Secretary of State’s future plans?

**Michael Gove:** When it comes to individual species, we will follow the scientific advice that CEFAS and others give us. Overall, however, as we take back control we will have the opportunity to catch more fish in our own waters. The majority of the fish that are caught in UK waters are not caught by UK vessels. Let me give the hon. Gentleman one example. I do not know whether he knows what percentage of cod caught in the English channel is caught by French boats—I do not know whether anyone in the House does—but it is 83%. What percentage of cod caught in the English channel is caught by UK vessels? Just 7%. That is a fundamental inequity in the allocation of national resources. The Bill will allow us to decide who catches what and where, and in line with which environmental principles.

It is not often that a piece of legislation comes before the House that provides us with an opportunity to say to some of the most fragile communities in our country, our coastal communities, “There is real hope and a chance of an economic renaissance. Your suffering has been recognised and we can make a positive difference.” It is not often that legislation comes before the House that, if passed, would see an industry potentially double in size and in its capacity to generate new jobs and new economic opportunities. It is very, very rare that legislation that comes before the House achieves such social and economic goals and at the same time allows this country
to underline its credentials as a leader in environmental practice of a kind that other countries would wish to emulate. Not only does this Fisheries Bill manage to bring hope to coastal communities and to reinforce the economic gains of leaving the European Union, but it underlines our credentials as an environmental leader, which is why I commend the legislation to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I have now to announce the result of today’s deferred Divisions.

In respect of the question relating to taxation relief and international tax enforcement (Jersey), the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 238, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the question relating to taxation relief and international tax enforcement (Isle of Man), the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 238, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the question relating to taxation relief and international tax enforcement (Guernsey), the Ayes were 302 and the Noes were 238, so the Question was agreed to.

In respect of the question relating to the immigration health charge order, the Ayes were 300 and the Noes were 232, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.]

Before I call the shadow Secretary of State to speak, let me say that I hope colleagues realise that there is a lot of pressure on time. A lot of people wish to speak so, apart from Front Benchers, obviously, I will be asking everyone else to try to keep their speeches below 10 minutes. I do not want to impose a time limit at this point, and that would, I hope, allow everybody to get in.

3.7 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in his words of support for all those who work in the fishing industry. It is important that we recognise them.

Amid all the ongoing chaos that we have seen over the Brexit negotiations, Ministers have consistently identified leaving the common fisheries policy as one of the few policy areas in which the Government’s deal can deliver. When the White Paper was published in July, the Secretary of State said:

“Outside the Common Fisheries Policy we can take back control of our waters and revitalize our coastal communities.”

He is also on record as having said:

“The day after we vote to leave, we hold all the cards and we can choose the path we want.”

I intend to set out why the Bill and the current approach to negotiations being pursued by the Government will not, in our view, “revitalize” our left-behind coastal towns, which have been hit hard by years of Tory austerity. I will also set out why, having heard the Secretary of State outline his position just now, I am even more convinced that only a Labour Government can secure the twin goals of a healthy marine environment and thriving coastal communities.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will the hon. Lady explain to me why my late husband suffered financially, quite considerably, for 12 years under a Labour Government, but she is now blaming Conservative austerity? I have witnessed it myself. Will she explain why she has not admitted that and apologised for it?

Sue Hayman: We know that coastal communities have suffered from austerity, and I will be talking about that further. However, I do not think it is appropriate to talk about individual cases.

However, having said what I have just said, we do not oppose the Bill at this stage, as it has turned out to be a mostly enabling Bill for making future decisions. It is clear that the Government have some way to go before we can all be satisfied with what is before us today. I hope that Ministers will reconsider parts of this legislation so that we can reach a consensus on the direction of travel. We intend to bring forward a number of key amendments in Committee to make those improvements.

In addition to looking at quotas, the Secretary of State also talked about the need to revitalise coastal communities, which have been badly let down by successive Tory Governments and the eight years of austerity. I represent a coastal community myself and have seen that damage at first hand. Those communities have been starved of investment. They have reduced services due to local government cuts, lower wages and stalled economies. If we look at the 98 local authorities that are on the coast, 85% of them have pay levels below the UK’s average, and, to date, the Government have done nothing to address that. Labour believes that well-managed fisheries and sustainable fishing practices can help reinvigorate many of these communities. This is a unique opportunity, as we have heard from the Secretary of State, to transform the way that we manage our fisheries to improve lives by driving economic prosperity, tourism and environmental benefits to our beautiful and unique British coastal areas.

However, if we look at the current distribution of quotas, it is clear that the system is not working in a fair or equitable way. According to research by Greenpeace, more than a quarter of the UK’s fishing quota is owned or controlled by just five families on the rich list of the Sunday Times. We are well-acclimated to hearing about taking our fair share of quota at the European level, but many in our coastal towns and smaller fleet want to know when they will get their fair share of the existing national quota.

The Secretary of State has talked about the unfairness in quotas, but the clear lack of proposals in the Bill to redistribute existing and future quota can be seen only as an endorsement of the current unfair system. Labour will bring in amendments to improve that situation. Given what the Secretary of State said earlier, will he support us in those amendments?

Recreational fishing also has an important role to play in the development of our coastal towns. The Angling Trust believes that many towns could prosper by attracting anglers who would travel right across the UK and from overseas to take advantage of top-class angling in healthy, well-managed waters.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. She talks about quotas and about who holds quotas. I have actually written to the
Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for an inquiry into who holds quotas, where they got the quota from and where a quota might be better distributed, including the idea of community quotas and the geographical share of quotas. Is she supportive of such an idea?

Sue Hayman: We are looking for the Government to address the historic imbalance and inequality in the fishing industry that these quotas show. The companies that we have looked at have benefited from a system that has led to a long-term consolidation of quota into the hands of a very few operators. We are very keen to look at ways in which that can be changed.

Gareth Thomas: May I take my hon. Friend back to the point that she was making about the impact of austerity on coastal communities? Does she not accept that, given the success of co-operatives, there might be an opportunity, through this Bill, to promote the co-operative sector in the fishing industry a little bit more, not least because one of the great things about co-operatives is that the surplus they generate stays within the local community?

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We would certainly support increasing co-operatives. I understand that there is an opportunity to double the number of co-operatives if we go about it in the right way. That was an incredibly important point.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Obviously, she is talking about coastal communities. Does she recognise—unfortunately, I was unable to make this point with the Secretary of State—that processors will not have a bonanza? If they are trapped having to pay 11% to 12% to land filleted and processed fish in Europe, but can land their fish directly to fish processors in Poland, harbours, markets, ice producers and processors will crumble. Certainly, the fishing associations on my coast do not support the Scottish Fishing Federation. The Clyde Fishermen’s Association and the Scottish Creel Fishermen’s Federation are not happy with this notion that all Scottish fishermen support Brexit—they do not.

Sue Hayman: Yes, that is a very important point about processors. I have a processor in my own constituency, so I fully understand the hon. Lady’s concerns. We want to see more British fish landed in British ports.

Mr Charles Walker: The hon. Lady was starting to make a good case for recreational angling before she was dragged away by colleagues who wanted to talk about commercial landings. Recreational angling accounts for about £2 billion into the economy, whereas commercial fishing accounts for about £200 million. If we want to maximise the UK’s fish stocks, as I am sure that we do, we need to focus on recreational angling and the value of recreational angling, and we need to have fish species that are largely kept back for recreational anglers.

Sue Hayman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very well-made point. Yes, I support exactly what he is saying. We know that the Secretary of State also recognised in his speech the importance of recreational angling. If we are to achieve the goals that we are talking about, can the Secretary of State confirm that he intends to bring forward future measures to support recreational sea angling? If so, can he provide us with some details on those plans today?

Ministers, when questioned about their support for our smaller-scale fishing communities, often point to the coastal communities fund. Members may be interested to know that, in response to a parliamentary question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), it was revealed that only about 6% of the fund has been awarded to the fishing sector to date. If the Government really think that fishing is the lifeblood of coastal communities, why do they not back this up with the funding that the industry so desperately needs?

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Lady with great interest, but I am finding it very difficult to reconcile the issue of fishing generally with the demise of coastal communities. Does she not accept that, just as in rural areas, it is not just the issues surrounding agriculture and fishing that contribute to a decline in coastal communities; it is tourism, lack of a manufacturing base and the brain drain? When we look in her own constituency, for example, any increase in the fishing industry will not help the village of Flimby, as it needs a greater package than just additional resources for the fishing industry, which she seems to be advocating.

Sue Hayman: Well, of course, any kind of regeneration needs to cover a number of different areas, but we know that fishing would regenerate many, many coastal communities if we were able to land more fish into British ports and if we were able to change quotas. The Secretary of State has said that we have a huge opportunity here to regenerate our coastal communities through investing in fishing, but, obviously, we must have other funding as well, which is why I mentioned earlier the importance of tourism.

Let me turn now to trade. I understand that around 80% of what we catch, we export, and that 70% of the fish that we eat, we import, yet in the Bill there is no mention of trade, customs or tariffs. Labour’s commitment to membership of a customs union would reassure both processors and catchers that they could invest in their industry safe in the knowledge that they would have tariff-free access to the European markets.

I want to talk briefly about the marine environment. Labour welcomes the language in the Bill about reducing the environmental impacts of fishing, but the Bill provides only a vague future framework and does little to explain exactly what would look like.

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the marine environment. She knows that the EU banned electric pulse fishing and then gave a 10-year derogation for Dutch boats—I think, 100 of them—to carry on with it. This really is ruining the ecosystem and the Bill does not ban it. Is this something that my hon. Friend might seek to put into the Bill in Committee?

Sue Hayman: Yes, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I can confirm that we will absolutely look at this matter in Committee.

We are asking for more detail about discard charges as well as the environmental and sustainability objectives around maximum sustainable yield fisheries management.
Labour would go further on environmental protections than the provisions outlined in the Bill and would categorically oppose any move away from a science-led, ecosystems-based approach. As my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) mentioned, there is only a vague reference to MSY in the Bill, and no clear roadmap on when and how this can be achieved.

We would like to know whether Ministers are still committed to it as we leave the EU. We believe that stocks should at least meet this standard by 2020 and will seek to bring that into the Bill if the Government do not.

Will the Secretary of State respond to the concerns of environmental groups such as Sustain that are worried that the Bill’s objective to gradually eliminate discards is far weaker and slower than the EU’s commitment to end discarding completely within a set deadline? This is an important point.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I think it would be reassuring to the House to know that the Opposition share our disdain for the common fisheries policy, which has allowed foreign potenates to devise a policy, paradoxically, that is simultaneously bad for fishermen and bad for fish. The Secretary of State set out his view about how we can improve on that. Presumably Labour would want to join us in condemning the CFP.

Sue Hayman: I am trying to make it clear that we are not opposing the Bill; we really do want to work with the Government to improve it and make it better for both the fishing industry and coastal communities.

Importantly, we have been told that environmental standards are not going to be weakened after Brexit. However, we are concerned that the Bill could allow the UK to fall behind where we would be as a member of the EU, so we want to ensure that this is tightened up and clear. On the international level, we would boost support for an ambitious new UN treaty for the high seas. The Government must stand up for our sea life by supporting an ambitious new UN treaty for the high seas. On the international level, we would boost support for an ambitious new UN treaty for the high seas.

The whole thing about bringing back control of our fishing is that we can actually put right the wrongs that happened about 40 years ago. There is no doubt—those of us in and around coastal constituencies know this full well—that if anybody suffered when we went into the then Common Market, it was our fishing industry. As we consider the Fisheries Bill, let us make sure that we right those wrongs and get our stocks back, and ensure that those who fish in our waters—if we allow them to do so—fish under our rules and regulations. Let us ensure that we have a sustainable fishing policy.

I very much welcome the fact that the fisheries White Paper says:

“Fisheries will be a separate strand of our future relationship with the EU.”

For far too long our fisheries have been controlled by the EU under the CFP, and for too long our fishermen have been managed as a single EU exclusive economic zone. The Bill gives us the framework to take control of our waters, to come out of the CFP and to become an independent coastal state. The UK alone will be responsible for our exclusive economic zone of some 200 miles or the median line. Now we need to make sure that the Bill works. However, it can be improved, and I welcome the fact that the Labour party is taking a positive view on the Bill, because it always helps when there is not too much of a great political divide across the House.

It is not clear to me what practical arrangements the Government have made for enforcement when foreign fishing boats have access to our waters, because there is no doubt—under a no-deal Brexit, or any other Brexit that we achieve—that we will need to ensure that we have control of our waters. We also have to ensure that the cameras and systems on the boats that monitor fishing are working and not being switched off. Those systems not only cover quantities of fish and who is fishing, but work very well as far as discards are concerned.

If ever there was a benefit of coming out of the CFP, is it with regard to discards. Not only is it a huge waste of resource to throw back into the sea good, healthy fish, most of which will die and probably putrefy the sea bed, but it is important that we land all the fish that are caught, as that means that we can have a proper monitor of what is in the sea and what is being caught so that we know that the science is absolutely right. Those of us who have been involved in fishing for many years, as many Members have, will find that while the scientists say one thing, the fishermen will tell us that they could walk to America on the back of cod because there are so many in the sea. There may be a slight exaggeration, but I think that Members get the gist of my argument.
Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. The root of the disjunction between science and the industry is the fact that the advice that is given is often based on data that are very old—almost two years old by the time they are used for decision making. Does he agree that in this brave new world of fisheries management, one of our first priorities ought to be the quick and dirty use of the data that are being harvested by the scientists?

Neil Parish: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention—he is right. I think that DEFRA is working much more with fishermen, and they will need to work more closely to ensure that the collection of that information happens more quickly. We also need to learn from the monitoring of how fish are caught and what is happening on the fishing boats, because all this is important. There needs to be trust between the fishermen and DEFRA officials, because that is sometimes lacking. There is a great deal that can be positive. I know that the Secretary of State and our Fisheries Minister are really driving towards that, and I think we can do it.

Richard Drax: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The point that is often ignored in fishing debates is that fish are born in one place, and then swim and live in another.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. Fish will move, perhaps because of water temperature or where the food is. Also, of course, they do not always swim together. Cod swim together and haddock swim together, so we can go out and make sure that we catch only one species of fish, but other types of fish swim separately, and we will often catch many species. That is especially the case in the south-west waters, where we are very much a mixed fishery, and that is why the discards are so important. We do not want the fishermen to target particular species, but we want them to be able to catch fish and land it all. The challenge is going to be making sure that we recompense fishermen for delivering fish that they did not have the quota to catch, but do not stimulate them into catching fish that they perhaps should not be catching.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend welcome the study by one of the northern universities and CEFAS to look at zonal attachment as a way of assessing fish stocks within the United Kingdom 200 miles from the median line limit?

Neil Parish: As always, my hon. Friend speaks great sense on fishing, and so she should, given her knowledge of it. Zonal attachment is an interesting way of looking at this. When we are managing our own waters, we should be able to manage that much more quickly, so that an area that can be fished can be opened up, or if an area needs to be closed down, for reasons of the environment or fish breeding, we can do so much more quickly.

Dr Sarah Wollaston: Further to the point about zonal attachment, does my hon. Friend agree with Brixham fishermen that sprats would be an ideal kind of species to look at, because 90% of them are caught within the 12-mile limit but we have only 52% of the total allowable catch? Does he agree that that would be a much more sensible way to proceed?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. By moving to a different system, we perhaps remove ourselves from some of the existing quota restrictions. Because those are historical, and because we did not necessarily get a good deal—far from it—when we went into the common fisheries policy, we have the opportunity to do this.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con) rose—

Neil Parish: I think I am going to use up most of my time at this rate, but I give way.

Andrew Bowie: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his interesting speech. The point that is often ignored in fishing debates is that fish are born in one place, and then swim and live in another.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a good point. This is about how we help these fishermen. Can a certain amount of help be given regarding the fuel needed to bring back the fish? What is the value of the fish when it is brought in? Is it going to be sold on the open market, and do we then put a super-levy on it so that bringing it back is not too attractive? These are some of the issues that I am sure that our Fisheries Minister and Secretary of State will deal with in due course, if not necessarily in the Bill.

Mr John Hayes: My hon. Friend is displaying that his grasp of fisheries is at least as great as his grasp of farming. As he develops this thesis, which is essentially about replacing discards and quotas with closed areas and other measures to preserve fish stocks, will he say a word about industrial fishing? While it is true that fishermen should be able to keep what they catch, industrial fishing sweeps the ocean floor, and the CFP has been singularly ineffective at dealing with its environmental consequences.

Neil Parish: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. We were talking earlier about pulse fishing, which is used in particular by the Dutch. That causes huge damage to not only the seabed but, potentially, fish stocks. I often think that going out to fish should be much more a question of licking a finger to see which way the wind is blowing, but it does not work like that anymore. We use huge sonar equipment so that we know exactly where the fish are, and we can hoover them up in massive amounts. As we fish, we therefore have to be careful that we keep the stocks sustainable. I always say that the difference between fishing and farming is that with farming, we can at least replace the stock if we want to, but fish are a wild stock and must be bred in the sea, so we cannot take out too many fish if we want to keep the stock sustainable. Those are very good points.

You probably do not want me to go on for too much longer, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will do my level best to move on quickly. We need more clarity in the Bill
about the practical arrangements, which we have talked about a lot, and I look forward to seeing more detail. In particular, I am concerned that fisheries might get bogged down in unnecessary bureaucracy. Many of these companies are made up of five employees or fewer, so we must ensure that the burden of bureaucracy is as small as possible.

There are concerns that once we have left the EU, we will no longer have an automatic right to land fish in any EU ports. That interesting point has already been raised today. While I am very enthusiastic about our getting out of the common fisheries policy and getting back these stocks of fish, we have to ensure not only that we have access to EU markets, but that too much of our fish is not landed in EU ports, because we have to make the best of the processing. All these things are essential. I know that some of them are not covered in the detail of the Bill, but they need to be recommended.

I feel that we can do a much better job with our own Fisheries Bill and by taking back control of our waters. Our fishermen, fish processors and anglers can and must have a better deal. I am sure that the Secretary of State and Ministers are aware that there is a huge market for Scottish seafood. Let us welcome the Bill, make a few alterations that might be necessary, and do a much better job than has been done in the past under the CFP.

3.38 pm

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I would like to start with a couple of points that arose from listening to the Secretary of State’s speech. First, he claimed that the SNP has not opposed the CFP and, in fact, wanted the UK to remain in the CFP. He clearly does not recall the Fisheries Jurisdiction Bill 2004, promoted by then Member Alex Salmond and signed by the right hon. Members for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) and some Tory and Labour MPs.

**Stewart Hosie** (Dundee East) (SNP): For the avoidance of doubt, that was a Bill designed to see the UK leave the CFP, in the name of the right hon. Alex Salmond, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the late Eddie McGrady, Elin Llwyd and Tory and Labour MPs. Does that not rather make a mockery of what the Secretary of State said earlier and show what a tenuous grasp of reality he has?

**Deidre Brock**: It certainly points to some short memories in this place.

Secondly, in March, the Secretary of State said that the Government had accepted a sub-optimal outcome for fishing in the Brexit negotiations. Will he tell us whether he still thinks that is so, and whether that view is reflected in the Bill? I look forward to that being addressed in the Minister’s closing words.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): Could the hon. Lady give us a history lesson about what a former Member of this House did? Does she agree with me that my predecessor as the Member of Parliament for Moray, in the most recent general election campaign—[Interjection.] I notice she is getting a whisper from the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie). In the general election campaign last year, when asked umpteen times on the BBC whether the Scottish National party would agree to go back into the CFP if Scotland became independent and wanted to get back into the EU, my predecessor said yes. The party’s sole aim is to go back into the CFP.

**Deidre Brock**: On our terms, of course. That is the point the hon. Gentleman is leaving out.

If we are looking for a history lesson, let us remind ourselves about the Tories, who have been selling out Scottish fishing for nearly half a century. Under Ted Heath in the 1970s, fisheries were considered expendable. In the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, the UK Government signed us up to the original doomed common fisheries policy, which consigned our fishermen to decades of mismanagement. John Major’s Tories signed up to a revised common fisheries policy in the 1990s, which scrapped vessels and destroyed livelihoods. In the 21st century, the Tories were attempting to enshrine the common fisheries policy in European treaties, while the SNP was trying to return controls to the fishing nations. Let us not forget that, very recently, Ruth Davidson was reported in The Times as calling fisheries a red line issue, and a Scottish Tory source was quoted as saying:

“...we won a lot of votes in the northeast on the back of our stance on fishing and wouldn’t be able to show our faces in Banff and Buchan if we reneged on this one.”

**Pete Wishart**: Does my hon. Friend not agree with me that the Scottish Tory MPs have made 20-gallon galoots of themselves with their resigning/non-resigning nonsense? I do not know if she knows exactly where they are just now, but are they going to be in or out when all this has concluded?

**Deidre Brock**: I am as baffled as my hon. Friend on that particular issue; that is for sure.

Returning to my speech, I think the context of this Bill has changed somewhat as a result of the withdrawal agreement. Some of the content of that agreement makes some of the apparent intent of the Bill a little more difficult to deliver and more dependent on negotiation and agreement with the 27 remaining members of the EU.

Having said that, let me pay tribute to the EFRA Secretary for staying the course and being determined to see things through to their conclusion. That seems to be a principle or a staying power that is somewhat lacking in his colleagues—erstwhile colleagues, I should say. They may have fallen by the wayside, weary of the march, but he carries on indefatigably. I understand that his father, as he mentioned, was involved in the onshore side of the industry, so he certainly comes to the Bill with some knowledge, but with a rather poor recall of facts if the newspapers are to be believed.

I acknowledge that the Secretary of State comes to the table with a backstory—if not a backstop—but that does not mean that he necessarily comes with the solutions the industry needs. The withdrawal agreement that was greeted with such delight by Government Members keeps our fishing industry in the common fisheries policy for a further two years after Brexit day, although of course our lack of membership means that the EU will decide the rules, while we have no say in them, no
say in how they should be implemented and no voice in the discussions about whether the CFP is meeting its policy objectives.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Obviously, the SNP has persistently voted against the common fisheries policy in the European Parliament, as the records show, as well as in this Parliament. My other point is: has the Secretary of State given her any reassurances about the customs union, which is critical for this excellent produce to get to its markets on the European continent?

Deidre Brock: Absolutely not, no. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I hope he has jogged the Secretary of State’s memory a little with his first point.

Mr Charles Walker: May I mount a bit of shameless lobbying? To tackle illegal lobster potting, the Scottish Government have put a limit on recreational lobster fishermen, such as myself, of one lobster landing a day on the west coast of Scotland. As the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who represents Barra, will know, it is often very difficult to get your boat out more than once every four or five days. Will the hon. Lady ask the Scottish Government whether, instead of putting on a limit of one lobster a day, they will look at a limit on the number of pots a recreational fisherman can have—say, five or six—beyond which they would need to get a licence?

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am certain that the Scottish Government will be closely following the debate and that they will make a note of his request.

If the steady stream of Ministers heading for the exit delays negotiations on the future relationship between the UK and the EU, we could find ourselves in an extended period where our fishing industry just complies with the rules, rather than having someone in the room standing up for it. Mr Barnier has already suggested that it will last for at least two years, which could be an underestimate if we consider how long it took to reach the much simpler withdrawal agreement.

We may have to suffer the CFP for quite a few years to come and it may change to the advantage of the remaining members of the EU, and not to ours. We may lose markets to sell fish into, or at the very least, find that our competitive advantage disappears because we will be subject to the same tariffs as other non-member states. I hope they will be the same tariffs, but going by the poor negotiation results that we have seen so far, we may end up with higher tariffs that reduce our fleet’s traditional competitive advantage.

It will not come to that, of course, because the new fishing deal has already been written into the withdrawal agreement by the departing Brexit Secretary. On page 4, the political declaration tells us that he has agreed to a new fisheries agreement with access to UK waters and assigned quota shares being “in place in time to be used for determining fishing opportunities for the first year after the transition period.” That means the common fisheries policy will carry on regulating our fishing fleets after we have left the EU. Taking back control has never sounded so hollow.

It is a sad state of affairs for this Secretary of State to have to deliver that news, because in March he said that he feels a “debt to fishing communities who are looking to government to deliver a better deal for them” and promised that he would ensure that our “fishermen’s interests are properly safeguarded” during the implementation period. That period starts on 29 March and lasts for an indeterminate amount of time, during which access to some important markets might be limited. France, for example, is the UK’s most important export market for fish. It is nearly twice as lucrative in cash terms as the US, and almost three times as strong in export volumes. Spain, by the way, is just behind the US in cash terms and slightly ahead in volume. Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Germany are all significant customers for our fishing fleets. Two thirds of our fleet’s fish is exported—perhaps a case of EU citizens jumping the queue to buy fish.

Once the deals are done and we finally leave the CFP, however, we will still be in it. It is a conjurer’s trick, and not a good one. Last year, the Secretary of State spoke to leaders of the Danish industry and guaranteed them continued access to our waters after Brexit. Earlier this year, the UK embassy in Spain reassured Spanish trawlers that their access to UK waters was assured. The withdrawal agreement replaces common decision-making on the CFP as a member of the EU with CFP rules handed down from Brussels and no input from Ministers from these islands on behalf of the industry here. Well done to the Brexiters—they certainly landed a whopper there.

The Norwegians sometimes describe their relationship with the EU as a “fax democracy”, because the rules just come down from the line from Brussels. That seems to be what removing ourselves from the EU will do, except, of course, that the European maritime and fisheries fund money will vanish. We have heard nothing about what might replace that in due course.

We will be left to accept the rules that are handed down: we will lose access to the decision-making body and the funding from the EU; and we will have to deal with the consequences of the Government’s poor negotiation techniques and the uniquely weak position that they have left us in. When the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food gave evidence to the House of Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee 26 months ago, he said that “we have to recognise historic rights...In some sectors, for instance on scallops, access to the French part of the channel is quite important to the UK industry. I accept there are trade-offs. All these things will be a matter for negotiation in a new world.”

During the referendum campaign, the Secretary of State for Scotland said:

“I think the fishermen are wrong in the sense there is no way we would just go back to Scotland or Britain controlling British waters. There are a whole host of international rules and agreements even if we were outside the EU which would impact on their activities.”

Then of course there is the same problem agriculture has in relation to workforce planning. We will lose
access to EU workers, who make up 58% of Scotland’s fish processing workforce and 70% in Grampian, where the Secretary of State’s family business was based.

Scotland’s seafood and fishing industries could be destroyed without access to EU markets. Scotland’s processing industry could be irreversibly damaged without access to EU workers. We also have to consider Scottish farmed salmon, the UK’s most valuable food export, and how losing the market advantage over Norwegian farmed salmon, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export, the UK’s most valuable food export. Without access to EU markets, Scotland’s seafood and fishing industries could be utterly devastating. Scotland stands to lose a lot without access to EU workers. We also have to consider Scottish fish processing workforce and 70% in Grampian, where the Secretary of State’s family business was based.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Fishermen in the north-east are often quoted as saying that more fish will be consumed in the UK, rather than exported. In my constituency, however, the south-west Scotland market consists of nephrops, crustaceans, langoustine and lobster. Some 85% are exported to the European market. It might well be that we all eat a little bit more white fish after Brexit, but I cannot see anybody being in a financial situation where they are going to be eating more lobster.

Deidre Brock: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and I am delighted that she brings up the interests of the south-west part of the country.

Once more, Scotland’s needs are massively different to the needs of England. Once more, we cannot have the Scottish industry locked into a rigid framework that will satisfy the English industry. Fishing, of course, has been a devolved matter since 1999 and the responsibility for nearly all the policy area rests in Edinburgh. I think the Government acknowledge as much, with the legislative consent motion they have asked for at Holyrood.

The industry cannot be squeezed into the same box as the English industry, but I appreciate the desirability of common frameworks to allow co-operative working on various issues—kind of like the EU managed with the CFP. Where such frameworks are sought and agreed by both sides they will be mutually beneficial, but they cannot be imposed. They must recognise the devolution settlement and respect it. There must be an element of trust that runs between Whitehall and Holyrood. Her Majesty’s Government must allow Scotland’s Government to govern in the devolved areas and this Parliament must allow Scotland’s Parliament to legislate in devolved areas.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): This is a characteristically divisive speech from the hon. Lady. On the subject of division, can she explain how, under Scottish National party policy, Scotland will be better served when it has to go into negotiation with England for access to its waters, and how Scotland would somehow get a better result under the SNP policy when it has to negotiate with Europe alone and trade with an even smaller WTO box?

Deidre Brock: I am always amused when Scottish Tories stand up to talk about divisiveness and accuse the SNP of being divisive about anything.

Returning to a more serious subject, in general the provisions in the Bill that relate to this area seem to fit those provisions, and, while I reserve the right to check that I am correct in thinking that, I welcome the drafting of the Bill in this respect. I cannot offer the same welcome to some other aspects of the Bill, such as the setting of quotas. Quotas for Scotland’s waters should be set in Scotland, just as quotas for English waters should be set in England and Welsh waters in Wales. That is devolution. I am sure the Minister or any Government Members would not want the Scots and the Welsh to set quotas in Cornwall, so they will understand why Scots would not want our effort limits set here. The same applies to foreign vessels in our waters. We know that the Secretary of State has been a little free with his pledges of access to our waters, but it should more appropriately be the devolved Administrations that determine such things.

The principle upon which devolution was determined, the division of responsibilities and powers, was that anything which was not reserved was devolved. Power does not flow from here to there, but is, rather, only held here where it is written in the devolution legislation. Matters determined on an EU platform but not written into schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998 are devolved and should go straight to Holyrood. We will go straight to Holyrood unless there is some power grab, some clawing back of responsibility, some deliberate diminution of Scotland’s Parliament. That would be unthinkable and we should do our level best to ensure that we do not legislate across that boundary.

Let us endeavour to ensure that we can modify the Bill appropriately so that we do not overcomplicate what should be a simple process. Let us make sure that the responsibilities and powers over our fishing waters and industries rest in the most appropriate places: the devolved Administrations for the most part, and this place, when there is no choice.

3.54 pm

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)—it is always good news when she finishes. In a competitive field, fishing is a clear winner of the stakes of the area in which the EU has shown maximum incompetence and caused maximum damage. I was made the shadow Fisheries Minister a long time ago, way back in 2004. I travelled all around the coast of the United Kingdom, down to South East Cornwall and up to Whalsay in Orkney and Shetland. I also went right across from east to west, seeing really successful fisheries in Norway, the Faroes, Iceland, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and down the coast of the United States, and I went to the Falklands. My conclusion, which I do not resile from, is that the common fisheries policy is a biological, environmental, economic and social disaster. It is beyond reform, and I do not resile from a single word of my Green Paper, written back in January 2005.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On the common fisheries policy, just in case the right hon. Gentleman should be tempted to try to rewrite history, I hope that he acknowledges that despite all the bluster that we are hearing from Government Members about the CFP, the Conservative party’s fingerprints are all over it. The Conservative party was complacent in its creation and has been actively implementing the CFP for the past 40 years. Will he acknowledge his party’s role in implementing it for the past four decades?
Mr Paterson: I remind the hon. Gentleman that this Green Paper was the policy on which we fought the 2005 general election, and his party opposed it. I will have no more humbug from the Scottish National party. We are sick to death of hearing from a party that supports the EU and then tries to weasel around on the CFP. The fishermen listening to this debate will be sick to death of this petty party political bickering. We have seen catastrophic damage to our most remote coastal communities, which could really benefit from a wonderful resource. We are world leaders in this area, yet we have allowed foreign fishermen to come in and take that resource. This resource could be a massive benefit to some of our most remote rural communities. We currently only take £900 million. That could go up to £1.5 billion to £2 billion, and if we processed the fish we could be talking about a £6 billion to £8 billion boost. That is a massively disproportionate benefit considering the remoteness of many of these rural communities.

Mr John Hayes: My right hon. Friend has highlighted the role that he played as shadow Fisheries Minister, and he did a great job. I was his predecessor in that job, and throughout the period that he described, the Conservative party was resolutely and entirely convincingly—to most people at least—hostile to the CFP, when parties sitting opposite had not woken up to the terrible suffering in the fishing industry when people cannot afford enough labour—her husband died because he was alone on a boat. We should not forget that. We saw on the harbour wall a drawing for tourists of lots of sa w on the harbour wall a dra wing for tourists of lots of haddock, and what is the problem off the coast? Her constituents are catching masses of haddock, because the fish have moved, but they have to be cast back. It is absolute insanity to have a bycatch problem and to address the discards without addressing the cause of it, which is the quota system.

I learned a clear lesson in the Faroes. The situation has been modified since, using techniques such as a catch composition, but I ask the Minister to promise that we will do some pilots around the coast on catch composition-based effort control, because it means working with the grain of nature. It was mandatory in the Faroes to land everything. The Fisheries Minister there said, “You may not like what you find, but at least you know what’s going on.” Our scientists do not know what is going on because we discard so much. Technology has advanced enormously, as I saw at Succorfish in North Shields, which used modern equipment to track not just the boats, but soak times, catches, and so on. If we did this using modern technology, we could monitor every single fishing boat every hour. Every fishing boat would become a scientific vessel sending back data.

I saw that in Iceland years ago now. Fisheries management there would send out radio signals, and boats around Iceland would be told to move on because there were too many discards. Way back then, the UK was doing it in the Falklands—the same management based on accurate, instant data. I appeal to the Minister. I am not thrilled with clause 23 on discard prevention charging schemes—those will be good, healthy fish that should be sold to consumers. We should work out pilot schemes for mixed fisheries. I admit that Scotland is different—pelagic fisheries probably need a quota system—but I really make that appeal.

Probably the most important issue is whether we really will take back control. That was the promise in the referendum and in our manifesto, in which we made it clear that we would take back control:

“...When we leave the European Union and its Common Fisheries Policy, we will be fully responsible for the access and management of the waters where we have historically exercised sovereign control.”

I would like the Minister to address this point. He is being bombarded with a helter-skelter of questions, but I ask that he take careful note of article 56 of the UN convention on the law of the sea, relating to exclusive economic zones—as he knows, those are 200 miles or the median line. Article 56(1) reads:

“In the exclusive economic zone, the coastal State has...sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploiting, conserving and managing the natural resources, whether living or non-living, of the waters superjacent to the seabed and of the seabed and its subsoil”.

Can the Minister absolutely guarantee that every decision affecting our marine environment, as well as that which lives in it and that which is extracted from it, will ultimately be decided by sovereign UK politicians who come to this Dispatch Box and answer to this House? Can he think of any circumstances after we have left the CFP—I would like him to tell us exactly when that will be—in which decisions would be imposed on our fishermen that ideally our politicians would like to resist? That is the nub of the CFP.

The most shocking mismanagement has been imposed on this wonderful industry and these incredibly brave people because we have always been outvoted. When I was Secretary of State—we have discussed this in respect of the common agricultural policy, too—my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who has just left his place, bravely did his best, but
we were outvoted. I want an absolute guarantee that article 56(1) of UNCLOS will prevail and that the Minister will be able to come back and be answerable to every one of us for fishing decisions. There must be no circumstances in which appalling decisions can be imposed on us once we have left. That cannot happen. If it does, we will have let down the 17.4 million, as well as the 16.3 million who voted for us in the general election, and all those Labour voters—do not forget the 85% who voted in the general election to take back control. Can he please guarantee that?

4.4 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson).

I speak as a former shadow Fisheries Minister, a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and someone who—as some Members who are present already know—grew up in Grimsby. I remember it as a bustling fishing port when I was a girl; moreover, it was the biggest in the world at that time. I remember the numerous trawlers in the docks, and the sense of pride among workers who were doing something that they knew was incredibly important: providing the nation with one of its favourite foods.

However, I also remember the decline that followed the so-called final cod war with Iceland. The devastation that it wreaked both economically and socially was vivid. I was a teenager at the time, but I remember areas, particularly around the docks—such as Freeman Street and East Marsh—suffering disastrous consequences. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) will refer to that later. Gone, too, are many of the food processing plants that lined Ladysmith Road. Findus has gone. Birds Eye has gone, no longer anchored by the town's status as one of the greatest food towns in Europe.

It is my witness of this decline, and the fact that my father was, for a period, a deep-sea fisherman—fishing off the coast of Iceland, at Reykjavik—that gives me an understanding of why our coastal towns and fishing communities matter more than their contribution to our national GDP would suggest. At this point, I want to pay tribute to all those who died serving the fishing industry. In Grimsby, every time a trawler went down or men were washed overboard—that was the commonest cause of death—the children in their primary schools would repeat the “Fisherman’s Prayer” and sing “The Fisherman’s Hymn”. It was all too common, particularly in the 1950s, for those children to have to sing that hymn and say that prayer.

Let me now deal with the Bill. I have a number of concerns about it. First, the Government’s stated aspiration is to develop “world leading fisheries”. Clause 1 sets out how this would be developed, including objectives such as creating a sustainable industry. We would all support that, but, unfortunately, the light-touch duties placed on the authorities potentially undermine the delivery of those aspirations. For example, while the Bill rightly contains an ambitious objective to ensure that all harvested stocks are recovered to, or maintained at, a biomass above that capable of producing maximum sustainable yield, the Bill places no duty on regulatory authorities to ensure that fishing pressure is managed in a way that delivers on that objective.

We have to ask whether the Government are really committed to restoring stocks, or whether they will put political pressures first, at the expense of the science and the data available. There is a history of those pressures leading to that kind of over-exploitation of our stocks, not just in our waters, but throughout the waters of the European Union.

Secondly, there are concerns in relation to our marine environmental regulations. The fisheries White Paper acknowledged concerns about a possible “governance gap” which could threaten accountability for the implementation of the regulations. It also suggested—as have consultations on the proposed environmental principles and governance Bill—that a new independent environmental regulator should have a role in relation to the marine environment. As things stand, this Bill is opaque about how the forthcoming environment Bill will protect our marine environment and how the “governance gap” will be closed. Clarifications of those issues would be welcome as the Bill proceeds, and I hope that the Minister will comment on them when he winds up the debate.

Clause 28 will give new powers to introduce financial schemes to promote sustainable growth and to improve the marine and aquatic environment. They will replace existing powers and allow new funding schemes to replace funding currently received under the European maritime and fisheries fund. However, as the clause is currently drafted, those grant-making powers do not reference clause 1’s sustainability objectives, such as an ecosystem-based approach. That strikes me as rather strange and concerning, and, again, I would welcome clarification. I understand that the fisheries statement will reference clause 1 and the powers will come under the remit of the statement, but clarification would be welcome.

My final point relates to the very important fact that the fishing industry is not just about the catching side: there is still a very important processing and aquaculture industry alongside it, most of which, unsurprisingly, is based in or nearby fish-landing towns such as Grimsby and Immingham. Indeed, 21% of the industry is in Yorkshire and the Humber. It is an important provider of jobs in those areas, and for my home town of Grimsby, it is still an important source of employment, with some 4,200 jobs dependent on the sector. These processing plants also export much of their product into the EU, in a market worth £1.3 billion, where we still enjoy a trade surplus. It is therefore vital in the drive to create world-leading fisheries that processing is not forgotten, as so far it has been in this debate. Full tariff-free access to the single market must be retained for the industry.

Mr John Hayes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about processing, and it also requires concentration on productivity, investment in technology and making sure our processing industry is as competitive as possible. I hope that can be debated during our deliberations on the Bill and included in the Government’s objectives.

Angela Smith: I do not disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. Grimsby makes some of the very best premium products in the world. One of the local fish-finger producing plants can take the fish from the moment it has landed at Immingham and have it in the lorry going
to the supermarket in six hours. One of the reasons why that is possible, and why the time from the moment of departure from Iceland to getting the product in the shops is concerted into a minimum, is the single market. That fish is as fresh as possible and those products are as good as they are because the single market has made it possible to ensure guaranteed standards while at the same time maximising productivity.

Dr Whitford rose—

Angela Smith: I am not going to give way again as many Members wish to speak.

Any failure to secure access to the single market, such as by sacrificing our access to the market in return for keeping access to our waters broadly to ourselves, will represent a betrayal and could decimate processing in areas where the jobs and economic activity it provides are vital. I am convinced that the processing side of the industry, which accounts for 64% of the employment in the sector, will not want its interests to be sacrificed on the grounds that we will give no, or very limited, access to our waters to foreign vessels.

We now have a withdrawal agreement on the table alongside the political statement, giving something of an indication of the direction of travel. This political statement, however, gives only the faintest glimmer of what will happen after the transition period, which is not good enough, particularly so far as fisheries are concerned. It is also true that this Bill, like the Agriculture Bill, is enabling and contains a number of Henry VIII powers. Like others in this Chamber, I worry about the use of this mechanism given the lack of effective parliamentary scrutiny that accompanies the use of statutory instruments. I therefore hope the Government will think more carefully about this Bill and allow it to be amended to ensure it gives greater clarity on the direction of travel of our fishing industry.

4.14 pm

Mrs Sherryl Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): First, I want to thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) for her tribute to the bereaved families of fishermen, and I also want to put on record my grateful thanks to the Secretary of State. My family would also like me to say thank you. I would also like to pay tribute to the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen and to the rescue services who go out in all weathers to ensure that our fishermen are safe.

The Bill provides the legal framework for the UK to operate under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea after we have left the European Union on 29 March 2019, something that my late husband and I worked towards since the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, it is important to look at the wider matter of the terms of our exit from the European Union and at the political declaration that the Prime Minister is in Brussels talking about now. I know that the terms will be a cause of concern for many of my constituents and for the fishing industry throughout the UK.

It is no secret that many people feel that the UK’s rich fishing resources were sacrificed when we joined the European Economic Community. Agreeing to the principle of equal access to a common resource—the total EU pond—at the time was in my opinion a dereliction of duty by the then Conservative Government, and I would like personally to apologise, even though I was not a Member of this House in 1972. Indeed, I was not even old enough to vote. It was a dereliction of duty, and the disastrous permanent share-out of the catch for each species in UK waters from January 1983 has left the UK fishing industry a shadow of its former self. An example is that of channel cod, of which the UK is permitted to catch 9% a year while France takes about 80%. We now face a situation in which other EU vessels take five times more in monetary value from the UK exclusive economic zone than UK vessels take from all the other EU EEZs. I have to say to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge that the massive value of that fish could benefit the economy of the United Kingdom, but at the moment it is just being given away, with other member states coming in, catching and taking away. There is no benefit to us in that arrangement.

On the morning of 14 November, it was reported that Sabine Weyand—Michel Barnier’s deputy who leads the EU’s negotiations at a technical level—said that the UK would be forced to concede on fisheries as part of the withdrawal agreement, meaning that Britain would have to “swallow a link between access to products and fisheries in future agreements”.

The French are leading a group of other member states in demanding a link between access to waters and a trade deal. Lots of reports have shown this, but we must not accept such a link. That would be a complete repeat of what happened in 1971 when the UK Government caved in at the last minute and allowed equal access to a common resource.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I should like to associate myself with my hon. Friend’s comments in paying tribute to the various associations and organisations that support our fishermen. Does she agree that there is no precedent anywhere for access to a third country’s natural resources forming part of a trade agreement?

Mrs Murray: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. In relation to Norway and the EU, access to resources is negotiated on an annual basis and Norway has tariffs attached to its fish. There is no link there, and it is completely wrong for people to say otherwise.

I see that my Cornish colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), is in his place. I was going to ask the Secretary of State this question, but I shall ask my hon. Friend instead. Will he please ask the Secretary of State to categorically reaffirm that British fish will not be used to buy a trade deal with the EU? Will he also ensure that only the fish that United Kingdom vessels—I do mean United Kingdom vessels, because Scottish vessels will benefit from this as well, as will those from Wales and Northern Ireland—cannot catch will be made available to other nations? Can he also assure me that, because the catch levels of the UK fleet have been artificially deflated since 1983, allowance will be made for UK fishermen to realise their total catching capacity?

The NFFO would like the Government to establish a formal advisory council to guide policy, promote collaboration between central Government, the devolved Administrations and the industry, and allow an ongoing
dialogue in what is a naturally variable industry. An advisory council could play a leading role in the use of secondary legislation to ensure an agile and responsive approach to fisheries management.

It is understandable that the Bill refers to maximum sustainable yield as an approach to sustainable fisheries management. However, if maximum sustainable yield is set as a rigid, time-bound objective, it will prove unworkable. We have seen that happen time and again, and the CFP is the prime example. Setting quotas for sustainable fisheries management in mixed fisheries must take into account a number of different, and sometimes competing, factors. In an earlier intervention, I mentioned zonal attachment, which is an important new way of looking at fisheries management and the assessment of stocks.

Where agreement between fisheries administrations cannot be reached, some sort of approach is needed that allows appeal. It would be useful if the Minister considered putting in place a dispute resolution system that would not impact on fisheries.

I have a few asks for the Minister. Will he look at clause 42, particularly subsections (3) and (5). We need a date for when the provisions come into force, because the fishing industry needs to be able to plan. It has accepted that the implementation period will not end until 31 December 2020, but it would be reassured if we inserted the words “no later than 31 December 2020” into those two subsections.

To sum up, setting aside the complex and controversial questions surrounding parliamentary approval for the withdrawal agreement, much still hinges on the negotiations ahead. The UK’s legal status has altered and its leverage in fisheries negotiations has changed dramatically, but unless that new status is used to address the distortions in quota shares, fishermen will question what it has all been for. English fishermen in the channel have struggled with a 9% share of the cod quota, compared with France’s 84% share—it has been exactly the same for haddock, which my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) mentioned.

To deliver the fair share of fishing opportunities that they rightly see as theirs, British fishermen, in this second round, will expect our negotiators to be as tough, astute and hard-nosed as they need to be to realise the benefits of our new status as an independent coastal state. I really hope that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have got that message from fishermen today.

4.24 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Scotland has 8.4% of the UK population and 60% of the total catch, so fisheries are hugely important to ports such as Fraserburgh on the east coast, Lerwick in the north, Kinlochbervie in the west and, of course, on my own islands on the west coast.

The largest fishery organisation by membership in Scotland, the Western Isles Fishermen’s Association, has flagged a number of things as important and, as the MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, it is right that I repeat them. Those with Facebook friends in the Hebrides will know that at the weekend a large bluefin tuna washed ashore on a beach in Tolsta, on the east coast of Lewis. Bluefin tuna are all around. Indeed, Angus Campbell from Harris was in touch yesterday with a tag of a bluefin tuna that was found around Scarista in the west of Harris, and he regularly comes across shoals of bluefin tuna on his trips to St Kilda.

We expect to see a trebling of the allowable catch of bluefin tuna to 38,000 tonnes, and we are now seeing a lot of tuna in our waters, now seemingly all year round if a bluefin tuna has washed up in Tolsta in November, so our big ask—or our moderate ask—is that we have access to that allowable catch, as the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) said, both for catch and release for sporting use and for catch and sale. If the allowable catch is increasing threefold, surely one of the benefits we might see from this upheaval is that we have such access, because bluefin tuna are becoming increasingly plentiful in our waters.

The Western Isles Fishermen’s Association, through its excellent secretary Duncan MacInnes, has done a power of work over the past few years, and it raises a number of areas of concern. There is a concern about the over-10 metre fleet. The Highlands and Islands development board, which some will remember from years past, gave grants for an awful lot of vessels to be built, and some of those vessels are still catching and still contributing. There is a need to upgrade, to reinstate and to reconsider how exactly we retool and re-equip coastal communities to make sure they are ready to catch.

Western Isles Council runs a loan scheme in conjunction with the banks, and it has a very low failure rate, but we are looking for the Government to introduce a business loan guarantee scheme to assist the fishing industry, with similar terms to those offered in other industries.

The Western Isles Fishermen’s Association also refers to access to quota opportunities, and it notes that in the last 40 years the fleet has reduced from 273 vessels to 220, and the number of fishermen is down from 499 to 377. In addition, whereas pelagic and whitefish landings used to account for 97.5% by volume and 73% by value in 1973, the position now is that shellfish account for 96% by volume and 90% by value.

An Eriskay fisherman once told me, “I can remember a time when I sold off my rights to fish mackerel and herring to 20 boats and to 50 families on the east coast of Scotland.” I have written to the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to...
ask that the Committee looks into who holds the quota, where they got the quota from and whether the quota might be better distributed and, of course, that it considers the idea of community and geographical quotas. Community quotas have worked very well indeed in other areas.

A prickly area that has not been properly touched on is seal management. I cannot resile from mentioning the volume of seals and the amount of fish they are taking. There is a colony of about 30,000 seals around the Monach islands, west of Uist. The annual consumption is 2.5 tonnes per seal, so an estimated 75,000 tonnes of fish are being eaten. A very conservative estimate of the value of that fish is about £1,000 per tonne, so we are talking about some £75 million of fish. I put this suggestion out there for people to ponder, but we could have a seal management plan that might involve something like contraceptive darts to limit the number of seals, because their numbers are out of balance with the marine environment. Perhaps a lack of killer whales is our concern and an issue in that area.

I mentioned the spurdog to the Secretary of State—he looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights and I had to say the word twice. The spurdog is a dogfish with a particular spur on its dorsal fin. It is often caught in bycatches at the moment; it cannot be landed and cannot be used. Fishermen have sent me photographs of 20 or 100 boxes of spurdog that they have caught. In this winter period—probably from now until March—spurdog will regularly turn up in the nets. At one point when I was fishing, they were not great to spot with sonar—because of the lack of a swim bladder—although that might be different now, but they are certainly ending up in nets by accident. They are a nuisance to clear and fishermen cannot land them, despite their having value in other countries, so let us make sure something happens on this issue of spurdog.

One thing I want to mention is the expectation management that will probably be required. I can see from Government Members that Brexit will never be great for Brexiteers who have envisaged Brexit in a slightly different form, but in Iceland there has been a change in fisheries. Some 80 or 90 years ago, 24% or 25% of the Icelandic population were involved in fisheries, but now the figure is about 4%, and that is due to technology. Iceland wants to see fewer people involved in fisheries. The fishing concern HB Grandi, which is based in Reykjavik, wants to see itself with even fewer fishing boats than at present, such is the way technology is moving. Its fishing boats are very different from those we see; they are about the size of car ferries, and on board there are hot tubs and so on.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con) indicated assent.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I see nods of knowledge from one Conservative Member.

Similarly, the Faroe Islands has managed to change a number of things. It recently introduced a concept in law under the Fisheries Minister, Høgni Hoydal, who was mentioned by the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), whereby the fish that swim in Faroese waters are the property of the Faroese people. The idea of fish being the property of the people of the relevant jurisdictions might be a useful thing for our jurisdictions in the United Kingdom.

I come on to one of the big things in fisheries. I received a text message before I got up to speak from Donald Joseph Maclean at Barratlantic, who is a first cousin once removed of mine, asking whether there is any movement on the EEA fishermen and getting guys on boats. We have been talking all summer to the Secretary of State and to the Home Office, but where the UK has got control it has done nothing. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I all went to the Home Office to ask for this in May or June, but nothing has happened. We have lost a lot of money this summer because the Home Office, where the UK Government have control, has not taken its hands out of its pockets to help fisheries. Indeed, I was told in the Home Office, “Angus, it is our Conservative manifesto on one hand and the economy on the other.” What is the answer? It is the economy, surely. But no, months later, nothing has been done, and that is absolutely negligent. I hope that if Donald Joseph Maclean is watching, this will at least help his blood pressure on this issue, because it is fair near bursting at times.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about UK Government support for the fishing industry. Will he welcome their support in the recent Budget of £12 million that will support our fishing communities across our United Kingdom as we leave the EU?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: If we look at where this is going, we see that it is not going to be the headline figure the hon. Lady states. I hope that she wants the UK Government to replace absolutely any loss of subsidy and grants from the EU, because that is going to be a big concern of fishermen. As a young fisherman in Castlebay told me, “I am lucky: I have got a fishing boat, through help from the European Union. Will that remain afterwards?” I said, “The Tories are in charge. I cannot guarantee that one at all.”

We have to think about our access to markets as well, and we have to be worried about a sell-out. We need to remember that when David Cameron went to Europe to try to find concessions, fisheries were nowhere near where he or the Conservatives were looking—not a sheep was heard. It was all about migrants but, as I have just said, we need migrants. We need people who come to help us on our boats and who work in our communities—they are very important. If one thing comes out from this debate, it should be that the Scottish National party has a big welcome for people who want to come and work in Scotland. We would have more people. My community wants them; my Government want them; my local council wants them; my local processing sector wants them; and my local fishing boats want them. Only one office in London—the Home Office—is stopping people from coming, to the economic detriment of my community.

We should think of the patriotism that crops up in fisheries debates. Let us have some patriotism in landings as well. We must also think about aquaculture and about salmon, which accounts for a huge part of our industry.
We have to be sure that nothing is stopped at borders. Once, at Prime Minister’s questions, I asked the Prime Minister about shellfish exports being stopped on lorries—she, too, was like a rabbit in the headlights. She did not quite understand that the catch goes live to France and Spain, because they pay the top prices. If we do not get to those markets, we will not replace them in the United Kingdom, because people here will not pay the price that is paid elsewhere for crab and shellfish, so we will see a loss. The £1 billion that I mentioned earlier would be lost and would not be as large an amount in subsequent years. The Government who are treading this path have a real responsibility. For years they ran along with the common fisheries policy and did not take anything on board, but now they take a different tack. We are watching what they are doing very closely, and we will watch them with a beady eye in the years to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Members have not been too bad at sticking to the time limit suggested earlier, but as the House can see, a great many people still wish to speak. I would like to try to impose a voluntary time limit of six minutes. [Interruption.]

I appreciate that this is a bit of a surprise for the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), who has much to say on this subject, so I shall not hold him to six minutes, but everyone else is now warned.

4.36 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker; I appreciate that, as I had already tried to pare down my speech to the 10 minutes suggested earlier.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). As he mentioned, he, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who unusually is not in the Chamber, and I have the same consistent issue of access not to EU labour—this is not a Brexit issue—but to the non-EEA and I have the same consistent issue of access not to EU labour. For example, clause 7 revokes the CFP regulation that allows EU vessels unfettered to fish in our own waters. For example, clause 7 revokes the CFP regulation that allows EU vessels unfettered...
access to our waters. Clause 8 introduces the common-sense principle that any foreign vessel that wants to fish in our waters must do so on our terms. This is taking back control of our waters, and it is the basis of the British fisheries sector’s revival. Clause 9 covers those UK fishing boats that are required to be licensed, as well as stating those for which licensing will not apply.

Clause 1 defines the fisheries objectives, as many Members have said, and chief among them is the sustainability objective, which ensures that fishing and aquaculture is environmentally sustainable in the long term and managed in a way that is consistent with contributing to the economy and to food supplies. I was going to go through all the other objectives, but as I am pushed for time, I will skip them.

Clauses 9 to 17 set out rules for the licensing of UK and foreign fishing boats—I just want to cover that briefly. Although the devolved Administrations are responsible for licensing boats in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, licences issued by any UK fisheries administration will be valid across UK waters. The UK Government will agree access arrangements internationally and, although each of the devolved Administrations is responsible for issuing licences to foreign vessels in its zone, it is encouraging to know that the UK Government will administer the system, having already been provided with consent by the devolved Administrations.

Clauses 18 to 22 cover the allocation of fishing opportunities, an area on which I would like specific clarification from the Minister. Clause 18 deals with the Secretary of State’s power to determine fishing opportunities. I would appreciate it if Ministers commented on the appropriateness of the Secretary of State setting quotas for lobster or brown crab in Scotland which, I believe, are subject to international agreement. Clause 22 is about the sale of English fishing opportunities. Given that English-registered vessels operate in Scottish producer organisations and vice versa, will the Minister please provide clarification on whether these would be available for all UK vessels?

Finally, let me say something about the future of the fishing industry in my constituency and of fishing communities around the UK. After decades of deterioration within the CFP, we will not see a full recovery overnight. Government support will be required, and this House has previously been assured of that support by the Prime Minister and others “to secure a sustainable and profitable fishing industry that will regenerate coastal communities and support future generations of UK fishermen.”

I conclude by reassuring the Minister that after we leave the CFP and become an independent coastal state, with all the powers and control that that entails, I will look forward to continuing to work with the Government to deliver that ambition to regenerate not only the fishing industry, but the wider communities and economy for which the “sea of opportunity” will deliver.

4.44 pm

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): This is an important Bill. Leaving the EU and the CFP will require effective management of our fisheries, and it is just as crucial that fishermen and fishing communities get as much certainty as possible, as far as there ever can be certainty in fishing. I think that fishermen will broadly welcome many of the provisions in the Bill, including those on controlling access to UK waters, quota and equal access for UK vessels in UK waters. However, I believe that there is still a strong case for ensuring a link between landings and home port, because it is important to recognise that fishing is more than just about catching fish; there are also issues about the sustainability of ports and port jobs.

I welcome any emphasis on a quota increase for smaller boats. Most of the North Shields fleet are under 10 metres. As been has already been said, these are the very boats most likely to land at local ports, and to fish selectively and environmentally. Despite the assurances of the Secretary of State, I still think that the Bill as drafted is in danger of missing an opportunity. If the largest five quota holders control a third of UK quota and half of UK quota is currently owned by big companies based overseas, there has to be an opportunity for a much fairer approach. Also, if 80% of the fleet are smaller boats, why is it that they get 6% of the quota? The Secretary of State attempted to give assurances for the future, and he will be held to those assurances.

I want to talk a little bit about politics—we have seen a little bit of it this afternoon—because every Fisheries Minister and every fishing representative I have ever met who has attended the annual Fisheries Council speaks about the debilitating effect of politics coming into play. Whoever the Ministers are, we must recognise the potential for politics coming into play in any alternative process. The NFFO itself describes the joint fishery statements, which it welcomes, as having scope for friction; that could be an understatement. For example, while there is support for equal access for UK vessels, there would be concerns for fishermen in my area if different regulations were introduced by different devolved authorities, so this may well prove to be a difficult matter.

I will mention another political risk for Ministers. The drift net salmon fishery in the north-east is a heritage fishery. The few licences that remain have come under pressure from successive Conservative Fisheries Ministers, who want to phase them out. Ministers have blamed the EU, saying that the fishery is part of a wider discussion on stocks. The fishermen say that it is about appeasing landowners who want to rent out fishing rights. They cannot both be right. In taking back control, Ministers need to recognise that they are going to have to own their decisions; they will not have the EU and the CFP to hide behind.

Also politically, the Bill puts a great deal of emphasis on secondary legislation. Now, it may offer greater flexibility and responsiveness, both of which would be welcome, but the emphasis, particularly in clauses 31 and 33, is on negative statutory instruments. I think we need to avoid replacing one inflexible framework with another, so I would generally favour affirmative SIs, as well as the establishment of an advisory council—perhaps on a statutory footing—that would include, for example, the NFFO.

On the issue of flexibility, I understand the reluctance to put a maximum sustainable yield in the Bill on a statutory basis, but if the Bill does have a vision of sustainability, as Ministers claim, and if they want the UK to be a world leader, the Government and other authorities need to be held to account for what this legislation delivers in the future.
Leaving the EU and the common fisheries policy means that we will no longer be able to access the European maritime and fisheries fund—a fund from which the UK has benefited by £190 million between 2014 and 2020. There is no guarantee in the Bill that this funding will be replaced, other than a vague reference to grants. North Shields is a working fishing port, so it needs constant investment. We hope that the protection jetty, which is crucial for the fleet, will be renewed. The problem, however, has not been the EMFF—it is not that bit of the funding that has proved difficult. The problem with funding is turning to local authorities that have had their funding cut, or turning to the port authority, which is concerned about the fall-out from Brexit. I want to hear what the Minister is going to do about making sure that ports like North Shields have access to funding in the future.

The White Paper talks about the coastal communities fund. That fund followed on from Sea Change, which the previous Labour Government introduced to implement regeneration in coastal and seaside towns. In my constituency, the successful regenerations of Tynemouth and Whitley Bay have partly been funded from those funds. But seaside towns sometimes have no link with the fishing industry. What we need to avoid at all costs, with a fund that is of limited resource, is getting competition and having to choose between something that will make the port work and something that is there to regenerate seaside towns so that people visit our coasts.

The EMFF includes money for data collection—£52.2 million between 2014 and 2020. It also pays, in part, for enforcement, with £45.2 million between 2014 and 2020. I ask the Minister: where will the money come from to pay for those essential elements of a future fishing policy? If we control our waters and infringements are going to be regarded as offences, that needs enforcement, as the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) said. Last year, the Joint Maritime Operations Coordination Centre was established, but I understand from fishermen I talk to that its resources are stretched. In addition, we have dependencies in other parts of the world that require our help in policing the environmental protection zones that they have established.

So where is the money going to come from for enforcement? I fear, and many of my fishermen will fear, that it will come from a word often used in the Bill—“charging”. Fishermen operate small businesses, and, like many small businesses, they operate on the edge. A charging regime based on recouping the full cost of a regulatory regime may prove very costly. If clause 29 is anything to go by, we are talking about a substantial charging regime, and one that can be introduced and amended at the will of the Secretary of State through statutory instrument.

Let me turn briefly to something else that will determine the future of the fishing industry. Fishing is about catching fish, but it is also about selling them. The EU is our biggest importer and exporter, and market access is absolutely crucial. North Shields is the biggest prawn port in England; 95% of the prawns that are landed in North Shields are taken to be sold in Europe. They have five days to get there. Any delay, any bureaucracy or any tariff would put at risk not just the livelihood of the fishermen but perhaps the port itself. Fishermen tell me—I would like the Minister’s view on this—that if they do not have clarity by March 2019, or if there is no deal, they intend to tie up their boats, not just for weeks but for months on end.

The Government, as we have heard, have to stand by the promises that they have made. Fishermen felt let down when we went into the Common Market, and they will feel very let down if they do not get a good deal when we come out of the EU and the common fisheries policy. There is a lot in this Bill to commend it, and a lot of good ideas that should be applied whether we are in or out of the EU and the common fisheries policy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Hon. Members have been very good in observing a time limit, but to make sure that everyone has a chance of speaking, I am now going to impose a formal time limit of six minutes.

4.54 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): It is always a pleasure to take part in a fisheries debate and, more importantly, a debate on a fisheries Bill. This Bill is naturally important to my constituency, and I welcome what it sets out to do. Fishing is an integral part of our coastal communities and their economy and culture, and it is part of our proud heritage in Cornwall, so I welcome this ambitious Bill for the fisheries industry as we leave the European Union and the common fisheries policy.

The CFP has damaged the whole UK fishing fleet. I am slightly concerned about the impact that the current withdrawal agreement could have on the UK’s sovereign control over our fisheries, but I commend the Bill and what it sets out to do. In North Cornwall, many of my constituents are quite rightly concerned about the impact that the CFP has had on coastal communities and the economy. I therefore welcome the revocation of the requirement for equal access rights for EU boats, which sits at the core of the Bill, to truly take back control of our waters and its resources within the UK and the Northern Ireland Executive economic zone. It is important to recognise that, as an independent coastal state under the UN convention on the law of the sea, nothing short of the UK Government having full control over access to fishing waters, sustainable quota and environmental measures being set in the UK is acceptable.

As the UK parliamentary bass champion, I fully agreed with Samuel Stone of the Marine Conservation Society when he said:

“This is the time for the UK to demonstrate strong leadership and to show that it can be ambitious and serious about the protection of our seas.”

I welcome the discard objectives in the Bill, which aim to gradually eliminate discards on a case-by-case basis by avoiding and reducing unwanted captures; that is particularly difficult in communities like mine, which are mixed fisheries. However, my understanding is that if the implementation period is extended, we will still effectively be in the CFP, we will still have to bid for quota and we will be subjected to the discard ban and the fines imposed under it.

Owen Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that it is worse than that? Not only will we still be in the CFP, but we will not be formally taking part in those discussions
about quota. We will be invited to attend, and we may be consulted, but we will no longer have any proper influence.

Scott Mann: That is my understanding of the withdrawal Act. The implementation period should come to an end as quickly as possible, because the discard ban and the lines that might come about from it would place our fishermen under immense pressure.

I welcome the commitments made to supporting sustainable fisheries by ensuring that all our harvested stocks are in line with maximum sustainable yield. I was told recently that we must follow the science, and that is equally important with fisheries management. It is great to see the UK committing itself to internationally defined standards adopted by most successful fisheries and fisheries management regimes around the world.

However, more could be done through the Bill to ensure that we meet those targets. A light-touch approach to the duties placed on authorities to deliver on these objectives risks the complete undermining of the Government’s stated ambition. There is an absence of duty on fisheries managers to set fisheries limits on exceeding levels, to restore stocks or maintain maximum sustainable yield, and a lack of deadline for restoring stocks above maximum sustainable levels. I therefore recommend a binding duty to ensure that, as soon as the Bill comes into force, fisheries managers cannot set fishing limits above scientific recommended levels. That would deliver the UK Government’s objective to restore stocks.

I firmly believe that we have a chance to invest in our fishing industry and bring innovation at a time of change and changing technology, to improve both safety and prosperity in the industry. I welcome the Budget announcement of £12 million for the fishing industry, with £10 million of that money coming from UK Research and Innovation, to establish an innovation fund to help transform the fisheries industry, and £2 million being set aside for fisheries safety projects across the UK and on-board safety equipment; I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has pushed for that for some time.

The fishing industry and its practices have not developed much over the last 40 years, and it is time we brought innovation into the industry. Taking back control of our fisheries policy gives us a chance to ensure that the UK is a world leader in sustainability and safe and productive fishing methods. Investing in technology and technological change will help the UK to stick to its scientific objectives, which commit us to contributing to the collection of scientific data. An example of where we have gone wrong in the past with a fishing technique that has not evolved is the gill net. Currently, juvenile fish can be caught in an overloaded net, and this is one area where the tech innovation fund could look at new ways of developing gill net mesh.

Technology can also boost productivity for independent fishing businesses, support entrepreneurship and provide the ability to create new real-time data to allow fish to be sold directly to restaurants straight off the boats. An example of this is an independent small business in Cornwall that uses an app to register and download fish information as soon as the fish has gone into the boat, so that it can be sold to restaurants as soon as the boat comes back.

In my last minute, I would like to talk about recreational angling, which is hugely important to coastal communities such as mine. I commend the support in the Bill for promoting recreational angling. One opportunity this Fisheries Bill affords us involves Atlantic bluefin tuna. Stocks have collapsed over decades from commercial overfishing, but with the return of these iconic fish to the British Isles—in particular, to Cornwall—we now have a real opportunity to grasp the nettle and embrace this opportunity. As an independent and sovereign member of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, we have the opportunity to request a quota, and I believe we should. A fish that is caught by rod and line and returned to the sea is worth six times more to the economy than a fish that is landed, killed and eaten. I will leave it there, but I commend this Bill.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise to colleagues for interrupting this important debate, but the House should know that in the past hour some journalists in Brussels have been tweeting that the proposed European summit this weekend will be cancelled. I have no idea whether or not this is true—it could just be journalistic speculation—but given the importance of that potential meeting for the future of this country, have you had any indication from the Government that a Minister may be prepared to come to this House at 7 pm, before we rise, to clarify the situation?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We will not have sedentary interventions at this point.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but he knows very well that it is not a point I can answer from the Chair. I could do so if I had had notice of the intention of any Minister to come to the Chamber, but I have had no such notice. However, I am quite sure the right hon. Gentleman appreciates that, as matters have developed outside this Chamber on the subject to which he refers, Ministers have been very assiduous in coming to the House as soon as possible to keep the House, Parliament and the country updated about what is happening. I have every confidence that as soon as a relevant Minister has something of importance to say, he or she will come to the Chamber to say it.

5.3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I just hope that we get through the next six minutes without any major developments of that sort.

May I first associate myself with the remarks of the Secretary of State and others who have spoken in this debate about the very dangerous nature of fishing as an occupation? I was born and brought up on Islay in the west coast of Scotland, and I attended Islay High School, which, from memory, had in the region of 300 pupils. I calculate that at least five men have died in the course of their work as fishermen since I was at school with them. That is one very graphic illustration of the genuinely perilous nature of the work done by these men.

I very much welcome this Bill and the opportunity to contribute to the debate on it. Although my party does not have an automatic right to a place on the Public Bill
Committee, I hope it might be possible on this occasion, as the Bill progresses, for me to serve on the Committee. Fishing is an enormously important industry in the constituency that I represent. In Shetland, it accounts for about one third of the local economy.

We essentially have a piece of enabling legislation before us. I have some concerns about the inclusion of some of the rather broadly drawn powers for negative resolution, but that was always going to be the case, because unless and until we know the full picture of the political settlement on which the future management arrangements will have to be constructed, it will not be possible to have an awful lot more.

It is clear, however, that the fishing industry looks forward to the next few years with a great deal of expectation. Clear promises have been made, particularly on the Government’s refusal to allow access to waters for foreign vessels in return for access to markets. The Minister will be aware that the industry looks to him and his colleagues to ensure that those promises are kept, but it is clear from—[Interruption.] I do hope my speech is not interrupting the conversation on the Back Benches. It is clear from the answer that the Prime Minister gave me last week that that argument is still very much in play, and it is something on which those of us who represent communities where fishing is important will have to work together.

There has been a lot of knockabout. There was talk of the Fisheries Jurisdiction Bill, which was a 10-minute rule Bill brought forward some years ago by Alex Salmond. Among the supporters of that Bill were Alex Salmond, Roy Beggs, Eddie McGrady, Austin Mitchell, Ann Winterton, Elynn Llywd, Angus Robertson, Michael Weir and me. As the last man standing from that somewhat eclectic group, it is useful to remind the House why that Bill was brought forward and supported by that coalition.

The context was that the industry was under the cosh as a result of the cod recovery programme that was then being imposed by the European Commission through the December Council arrangements. As representatives of an industry that did not have a lot of political clout or commercial force, we understood that we would be able to make its voice heard only if we worked together. Many of us came to that position from different starting points and through different routes. I say to all the hon. Members from both sides of the House to understand that.

The question that I want the Minister to answer is how the voice of our fishermen will be heard during the period after March next year and before the end of 2020, when the transitional arrangements will come to a conclusion. It was put to me rather graphically, and rather well, by a representative from Shetland fishermen today, who said, “If you are not at the table, you will be on the menu.” We face that real risk during the transitional period.

How will we influence things such as the annual EU-Norway talks? I asked the Secretary of State and received a fairly broad answer, but perhaps I can get some more detail about how, in practical terms, when it comes to the renegotiation of the mackerel deal between the EU, Norway, the Faroes and Iceland, we will be able to get our point across. Essentially, we were rolled over once by the EU Commission on that. When we are not sitting at the table at the end of next year, how will we ensure that that does not happen again? Those concerns are not fanciful or insubstantial.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Surely, fishing was important enough to the Conservative Government for them to have thought about that in their transitional agreement with the European Union. It must be on page something-or-other.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my comments in March when the agreement was concluded. It was apparent then that the Government—certainly the then Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and probably the Prime Minister—did not understand its importance. I hope that subsequent events have persuaded them of its importance and that we will not see any backsliding in the future, because they would pay a heavy political price for that.

This is not a fanciful or insubstantial concern. The Minister will know that the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea advice in relation to North sea cod will be looking at substantial reductions again this year. I hope we are not going back to the situation in which we found ourselves at the turn of the century, but it is not impossible that we will be. The truth of the matter is that it was almost impossible at that point, with our Ministers sitting at the table, to make our voice heard and to get the deal that was needed. Without anybody at the table, I have to say that I think it will be impossible. The price for that failure to deliver during the transitional arrangements stands to be paid by our fishing fleets.

5.10 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, with your indulgence, may I take you to the sunlit uplands of 2028 as imagined by my great friends in the Angling Trust in this amazing press release?

“In South Cornwall, swathes of new guesthouses, hotels and restaurants have opened up to service the visiting anglers fishing for blue fin tuna in Falmouth bay. The millions of pounds this has brought to the region has resulted in hundreds of full-time equivalent jobs servicing anglers travelling from the UK and from overseas to take advantage of the world-class big game angling opportunities that Cornwall is once again offering.

Meanwhile, nearly a decade of management measures protecting the spawning bass stock in the southern North sea has turned Clacton-on-Sea into the go-to location for weekend Londoners now spending their money bass fishing and enjoying their catches cooked before them in one of Clacton’s many new seafood restaurants capitalising on the turnaround of the North sea into one of the UK’s most productive fishing grounds. More broadly, the Essex coast is once again seeing former charter captains, such as Stewart Ward, returning to the sea.

It is worth remembering that none of these dramatic developments would have been possible without the Government’s brave and radical decision when the UK left the EU to ensure fish stocks were managed sustainably and to maximise the return to the UK of the sustainable use of fisheries resources and protection of the marine environment.

The policy was controversial at the time, but the bold and ambitious move has paid off in ways even the most ardent supporter of such a policy could not have expected at the time. The UK is now a world leader in how to manage fish stocks sustainably, so they deliver the biggest benefits to society as a whole.”
Mr Charles Walker: The press release concludes: 

EU policy makers are now planning to follow suit in the next reform of the Common Fisheries Policy which, like the reforms before it, from 2002 to the last one in 2022 failed to live up to their promises.

That is the prize—and, my word, is it a prize. Imagine people from around the world travelling to Cornwall to catch 500 lb tuna fish—not to knock the tuna on the head and put them in a refrigerated ship to be cut up on a slab, but to be part of a conservation programme so that they can be tagged, measured and released; a big game fishery that means people who love fishing and catching big fish do not have to fly to Kenya to do it. People from around the world will be flying to London and regional airports to get to Falmouth, so they can go big game fishing. This is going to be a fantastic opportunity. Charter skippers will be able to charge somewhere in the region of £1,500 a day to take three fishermen, fisherwomen or fisherpersons out. Wow.

As for bass fishing, what an opportunity: thousands of beds around Essex filled up with anglers at the weekends and during holidays with their fly rods and spinning rods, coming to Essex and other coastal communities and counties to catch bass; bass that are no longer plundered but preserved for game fishermen. Of course, I do not want to see commercial fishermen cut out of bass fishing, but I know there is a way of managing our bass stocks so both interests can have a sustainable future. As well as the big politics of Brexit, that is what we need to be discussing today: the fish, because the fish are really important.

I want to say a couple more things before I sit down—I said I would be brief. The management of our fish stocks, as far as recreational anglers are concerned, has been nothing short of catastrophic up to this point. Until 1 October, if I had gone bass fishing with my son and we had caught a bass each, we both would have been required to return them. Even if they had been above the 42 cm keep limit, it would have been illegal for us to keep a fish. That is not right; fish stocks belong to everyone. I see in front of me my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who speaks so passionately about fishing. She understands that they need to be shared out and that recreational fishermen need to be able to keep a fish or two, or maybe three, for their family and friends. That is not being greedy; it is connecting with nature and the sea.

I look around the Chamber and see colleagues who are passionate about fishing, but we need to have a bit more passion about the fish. We need to make sure that we have viable fish stocks for people to enjoy.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: My hon. Friend is a fantastic spokesperson for the leisure and recreational fishing fraternity. Will he tell us how the ban on catching bass has affected the angling fraternity under the common fisheries policy and how they will benefit once we leave?

Mr Walker: The press release that I quoted mentioned Stewart Ward, who is a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who was sitting here a few moments ago. Stewart Ward lost his business. He was a charter skipper in Essex, and he wrote to me to explain why it happened. When people pay their £40 or so to go out on a fishing trip, they like to keep a fish or two, which is perfectly reasonable. It is a natural thing for someone to want to bring their catch home—it is part of the reward of the trip. However, his clients and guests were not allowed to keep the fish, and they could not justify spending the money if they were not able to bring part—not all—of their catch home. It has had a damaging—some would say catastrophic—effect on the recreational angling fleet and those who enjoy recreational angling.

I have spoken for too long. I think I have made the case for fish, and I hope that we in this Chamber can continue to make the case for fish long after we have left the EU in a few months’ time.

5.17 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As the Member of Parliament for Argyll and Bute, a constituency with an aggregated coastline longer than that of France, I am well aware of the importance of fishing and aquaculture to the economic wellbeing of my constituency and communities around the UK. I am also very aware of the dangers faced by fishermen, with the community of Tarbert, in particular, still mourning the loss of Duncan MacDougall and Przemek Krawczyk when the Nancy Glen sank in January this year.

As well as having an inshore fishing fleet, we in Argyll and Bute also export huge quantities of shellfish—some of the best in the world—and we are proud to be the home of many world-renowned salmon, halibut and trout producers. This means that there are significant differences between the industries on the west coast and those on the east, but that does not mean that they do not share common ground. First, they both rely on guaranteed, fast, unhindered access to markets. Secondly, they need to be able to recruit the right people to crew their boats, and they need sufficient numbers of people to process their catch quickly and efficiently and dispatch it to where it has to go—much of it to continental Europe.

They also share common ground on their justified fear of what is contained in the Government’s withdrawal agreement, because that agreement does not provide the frictionless trade that they want and need, nor does it guarantee access to the workforce that they require. Arguably, most damagingly of all, it puts Scotland’s fishing industry at a competitive disadvantage compared with Northern Ireland. In short, what the Prime Minister is proposing does not guarantee a bright future for the Scottish fishing industry.

The fishing industry, particularly on the west coast of Scotland, is facing a recruitment crisis. I was very pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) raise that issue, because we desperately need the ability to recruit fishermen to work on our boats and in our processing factories.

As I suspected we might, we have heard a great deal this afternoon about the shortcomings of the CFP, and I, for one, will not defend it, but let me be clear: as I said earlier this afternoon, despite all the bluster and obfuscation from the Conservative party, it was complicit in the CFP’s creation and has been actively implementing it for the past 40 years. Since 1970, the Conservative party has been in power for 38 years. From Ted Heath, to Margaret Thatcher, John Major and the rest of them, the Conservative party’s fingerprints are all over the CFP.
Let the record show that since the early 1970s the SNP in this place has been the consistent and vocal opposition to the CFP. I can understand why that makes nervous listening for Conservative Members. Despite their attempts to position themselves as the champions of Scottish fishing, the truth is that Conservative Governments down the years have time and again sold out the fishing industry when convenient. Deep down, they know that that is exactly what this Government are planning to do again. I look at the sprinkling of long faces on the Government Benches, and their demeanour is very different from what it was a year ago, because the Scottish Conservative Members know that they have been hung out to dry by their own Prime Minister and that the promises they made to the fishing communities in the north-east of Scotland before last year’s general election are absolutely worthless.

I am sure that the Scottish Conservative Members will have read, probably through the cracks in their fingers, the article by Mure Dickie in yesterday’s Financial Times, when he highlighted the reality of what is happening in the north-east of Scotland. One Peterhead-based fish wholesaler told him: “I think we have been sold down the river once again. It is an absolute disgrace.”

He is right—it is an absolute disgrace—but this is what happens when it turns out that the one-trick pony cannot even perform the trick.

It certainly did not take long for the “cast-iron” guarantees of the 2017 general election to become the latest addition to the shameful roll call of Tory betrayal of the Scottish fishing industry. Does anyone believe that had Scotland been in control of its own fishing assets in 1972 we would have allowed this vital industry to be treated as a bargaining chip in the way it has been for the last four decades? Only an independent Scottish Government can adequately look after the interests of our fishing industry; only an independent Scottish Government will recognise the significance of this industry’s contribution to our economy; and only an independent Scottish Government can be relied upon not to use our fishing industry as a bargaining chip.

The stark truth is that the glib and hollow promises made last year by career-hungry candidates wearing blue rosettes are now unravelling, because they were all predicated on a UK Government acting in the best interests of the Scottish fishing industry. History has taught them nothing. I look forward to the day when an independent Scotland, as a member of the European Union, can help to shape a common fisheries policy that works for us and is of benefit to our neighbours as well.

5.23 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and also to follow the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), because I have a message for him: it was a previous Conservative leader and Prime Minister who went to Europe, fought for the United Kingdom and brought money back from Europe. The SNP should not forget that.

I welcome the principle behind the Bill and the fundamental principle of taking back control of our fisheries. We have already debated what an enormous mistake it has been—for our fishing communities, our economy and our environment—to leave our fishing policy subject to EU control for the last 40 years. Nowhere is the damage the EU has caused to our country more evident than in the decline of our fishing industry and communities across the country.

All those who work tirelessly risking their lives to bring back the fresh fish we enjoy eating and supporting their families and communities should be remembered and respected for their endurance and sacrifice. Our fishing communities have seen their industry diminished, while billions of pounds of our money and taxes have been spent via the EU investing in other fleets, including the Spanish. We have seen the EU allocate more quotas for some species in our waters to other EU countries than to us. As we have heard—in fact, the Secretary of State gave this figure—84% of the rights to fish for cod in the English channel have gone to the French, leaving 9% for British fishermen. That is not right. In fact, about two thirds of the fish caught in UK waters are caught by EU fleets.

Successive British Governments have had to do more in the past, and that is part of the reason we now have the opportunity to take back control. We have seen controls that were placed on our fishermen, in our waters, to protect the environment completely ignored by the fishing fleets of other countries—famously so. Because of EU rules, Spanish and French fishermen in our waters have been able to ignore the environmental protections that we put in place and value.

Let me say to all those—especially Opposition Members—who think that the EU is some sort of guarantor of environmental standards and that we are incapable of protecting our own environment, that we need look no further than the devastation created by the common fisheries policy to see that it is the EU that cannot be trusted with our environment. That applies specifically to discards—the CFP has caused large quantities of healthy fish to be thrown back dead into the sea—and to the French vessels that used to undertake bass pair trawling in our seas, damaging the seabed and ensnaring in their nets all marine life, including dolphins. Of course there has been reform, but the discard ban is flawed, and the only way in which we can support fishing communities and manage the marine environment in a sustainable way is to pass the Bill and take back control.

That, as my hon. Friend the Minister will know, is why the Bill is so important. It is an enabling Bill, but it leaves so much open to future decisions. It empowers Ministers to take control of our own waters, but some of that will happen only in due course. We may be vulnerable to not being able to take back the full control that we expect and that our fishing communities across the United Kingdom expect too. There are fears that come the negotiations on the future relationship, our fisheries will once again be traded away.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) for her speech earlier, but, more to the point, for the robust work that she has done consistently on this issue and for being such an enormous champion of our fishing communities—if only we had more politicians who were so prepared to challenge and question. In response to a question from my hon. Friend last week, the Prime Minister said that “the UK should be an independent coastal state able to negotiate the issue of access to its waters”.

—[Official Report, 15 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 461.]
However, as my hon. Friend has rightly said, “Surely we should control access if we are properly leaving the European Union. Are we just leaving the Common Fisheries Policy in name only?”

This is about clarity. It would be a travesty if, after December 2020, the EU remained in control of our fisheries. In no circumstances should our rights to control our fisheries be negotiated away, and it is concerning that there is a risk that that could happen. There is ambivalence—a convenient ambivalence—in the language used in negotiations. Page 4 of the outline of the political declaration on the future relationship states:

“Within the context of the overall economic partnership, establishment of a new fisheries agreement on, inter alia, access to waters and quota shares, to be in place in time to be used for determining fishing opportunities for the first year after the transition period.”

Given the history of fisheries and the critical impact on fishing communities and the environment, I urge the Government not to lock our fisheries into a trade deal that would leave us in a place that is similar to our current position in the CFP. We must show leadership, and show that we will take back control over quota and over what can be fished in our seas. In future negotiations that we have as a coastal state, we should start from the basis that the fish in our seas are ours. The starting point should not be based on current EU agreements and the CFP.

There are many other concerns, a number of which have already been raised, but the fundamental principle must be that we are taking back control. Our Government will fight for our fishing industry and our communities around the country. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do this and get it right.

5.29 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It is an honour to follow my friend the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) in this important debate. As Members have said, this is the first time in over 40 years that the House has considered primary legislation on what is one of our most important industries. While some Members might be churlish and blame the Conservatives for taking us into the CFP, the fact of the matter is that I hope they take us out properly, and get us out totally, completely and absolutely—free, unfettered and unbowed, with a new policy for our fishing industry and our communities around the country. We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do this and get it right.

Those member states that wish to stay with the common fisheries policy and to be supplicant to the EU should consider their priorities. My nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, takes 40% of its total allowable catch from our British waters and is further dependent for processing on British trawlers that have landed their catches from the seas of Northern Ireland.

Brendan O’Hara: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that I, as the Member for Argyll and Bute—a constituency that overwhelmingly voted to remain in the EU—am indeed listening to my constituents when I stand up and fight for their right to remain in at least the single market and the customs union?

Ian Paisley: I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman represents his constituents in the way he wishes, and does so valiantly. He is of course entitled to do that and to have a different opinion on this matter, but we do have to leave the EU.

I want to address the issue of how the Irish Republic currently treats its neighbour, Northern Ireland. We have the voisinage agreement, which has not been raised today. It disgusts me that the Republic of Ireland keeps talking about not wanting a hard border in Northern Ireland and says that that would be a disgrace, yet has created what is effectively a hard border for County Down fishermen by breaking the voisinage agreement time and again. How is the Irish Republic going to treat Spanish fishermen when they are not allowed to fish in British seas after we leave the EU? How is it going to treat people from other member states? If it treats them in the way it has treated the people of Northern Ireland, those fishermen will feel a hard border within Europe also.

Kate Hoey: The Prime Minister talks about taking back control of our fishing, yet for the last two years, the Republic of Ireland has reneged on that agreement. We could have taken back at least that bit of control by saying, “Sorry, we’re not going to let your fishermen come into our area,” but the Government have not done so.

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. We all know why the Republic of Ireland has decided to have this debate about the hard border: it has taken away from its having to address the important, hard questions that it should have been considering, such as what sort of trade relationship it should have with its biggest trading partner, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It did not want to address that matter; it wanted to hide behind the issue of the hard border to confuse things and camouflage the real, important issue.

I raise that matter because according to the European Union’s most recent report on fishing and agriculture, if the Republic of Ireland does not get a trade agreement with the United Kingdom, it will lose a staggering £5.5 billion from its agri-food and fishing industry. It has been reported that the study “prepared for the European Parliament’s Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development lays bare the full potential impact of a hard Brexit and singles out the Ireland as one of the most badly hit member states.”

Yet what has that member state done? Has it tried to help in this? Has it tried to make the voisinage agreement work? No, it has done everything to penalise Ulster fishermen and Ulster farmers, and it should be ashamed of how it has behaved.

I hope that that sends the message to the Spanish and the French that that is how the Republic of Ireland is going to treat them, and about what sort of hard border it will have when it suits it. Little wonder that we have had so many problems with the Republic of Ireland over the past two years during this negotiating period.

The Fisheries Bill should lead to a revival of our coastal towns, as we have heard from across the Chamber today, and I hope that it really does. There is one way in
which we could achieve that, and I appeal to the Secretary of State and the Minister to do this. During the transition period, will they use every effort possible, and every investment opportunity available, to invest in our coastal towns and put them in a state of preparedness by increasing their production ability and improving their harbours? I hope that we can do the same for Scotland as well. It is critical that we have harbours across our nation that are able to land the catches that will be available to us and that we have processing industries in place from Argyll and Bute in Scotland to Portavogie and Kilkeel. All those things should be put in place, and we can do that only during the transition period. If we are not ready then, we will not be ready when we leave the transition period. I hope that we actually do this.

There is a fear that the withdrawal agreement, the Fisheries Bill and the transition period, when they are taken together, all mean different things to different folk at different times. As the right hon. Member for Witham said, we need clarity in this debate. We have heard something of that today from the Secretary of State, but we need to hear more. We also need to ensure that all these things dovetail properly so that our fishermen receive the clarity of language and meaning that they are entitled to. We have already heard some discussion about whether article 6(2) actually means what it says. Will it, for example, penalise our fishermen if a backstop is brought into place? I believe that it will, although the Minister assures me that it will not. We need more certainty on that point. If the Secretary of State were a lawyer, he would not be recommending article 6(2) to a client, and if it will penalise our fishermen, we should not be accepting it for one of our key industries in Northern Ireland.

The Bill fails to account for crew shortages. The immigration White Paper is not yet ready, and we will be able to make sense of this matter only when we get that White Paper. I hope that we will hear words today that will address that issue and that we will know sooner rather than later what the immigration White Paper will say about addressing the key matter of crew shortages. In addition, Northern Ireland demands fairness in how it is treated in the sharing out of quotas between Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales. It is essential that we get that fairness; otherwise, it could be catastrophic for how we behave internally as a nation.

I also regret that the Bill does not refer to an advisory council to help with management. Such bodies have proved most beneficial in Norway and Australia. There is also the key issue of our Crown dependencies. The European Union is able to take fish freely from the seas around our Crown dependencies, and we need to ensure that we have some sort of an agreement with Crown dependencies such as the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Finally, I pay tribute to the Minister as he prepares for his penultimate or final December Fisheries Council meeting. I wish him all the very best as he wishes bon voyage to Europe.

5.37 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my friend and colleague the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley). I, too, would like to pay tribute to our fishermen. We have had our share of tragedy in South Dorset, and I have seen at first hand the effect of losing a trawler and its crew on the parents and friends involved. It is devastating, and I pay tribute to all those who bravely go out to provide food for our table.

Sadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) is not here at the moment. I agree with his enthusiastic sunny-upland vision of how his constituency would look in, I think, 2028. He had a vision of a time when fishing will be back in our hands, when all the bed and breakfasts will be full, when local fish will be served, and when Weymouth and Portland—the most beautiful part of this United Kingdom—will be full of fishing shops and of people visiting and enjoying the stunning countryside and coastline. That is the vision—it is sadly sometimes lost in the House—that we need to hold on to as we respect the vote that was taken in 2016.

Fish is a particularly totemic issue, and I believe that this is a matter of trust. In this place, however, trust has dipped to a terrible ebb. At Question Time today, we heard the Prime Minister say that there was a threat of no Brexit at all. Afterwards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who was sitting to my right, asked the Prime Minister to confirm that there would be a Brexit, come what may. She did, but those two statements are incompatible.

I would like personally to thank my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, both of whom I have immense respect for. I know that they will work hard. The Minister, in particular—he has been in post longer than the Secretary of State—has worked extremely hard for our fishing and farming communities, so I thank him for all that he has done for my constituency.

The Bill revokes the EU legislation that currently sets the UK’s fishing opportunities, giving the Secretary of State powers to determine those opportunities. However, the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations has said:

“If the Government backs down on its promises to the UK fishing industry, many of the objectives that the Fisheries Bill is aiming to achieve will be impossible.”

The Government must not back down on their promises to this totemic industry. If we do, it will be to our shame.

Clause 7, on “Revocation of requirement for equal access for EU fishing vessels”, clause 8, on “Access to British fisheries by foreign fishing boats”, clause 11, on “Foreign fishing boats required to be licensed if within British fishery limits”, clause 12, on “Power to grant licences in respect of foreign fishing boats”, clause 18, on “fishing opportunities”, clause 23, on “Discard prevention charging schemes”, and clause 28, which relates to grants to the fishing industry in England after the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, will all become pointless if we remain in the customs union beyond the transition period.

Let us not forget that behind the scenes our European allies and friends—I regret to say this—are plotting and scheming, as they have been doing. We know that Sabine Weyand, Mr Barnier’s No. 2, told EU ambassadors in a leaked note that Britain “would have to swallow a link between access to products and fisheries in future agreements” after the transition period as part of any trade deal. She said:

“This requires the customs union as the basis of the future relationship. They must align their rules but the EU will retain all the controls.”
That sends a shiver down my spine, and I suspect that the fishing industry will feel the same.

We know that we will not have control of our waters until after Brexit day, which in my view is 21 months after March 2019. That is when this country, I hope, will be truly free. As I understand it, until that time we will remain in the CFP. Earlier I asked the Secretary of State whether extending the implementation period, rather than applying the backstop, would still keep us in the CFP. I would be most grateful if the Minister told us whether the answer to that question is yes or no.

I also seek an assurance that the fishing industry, Members of the House and all those in our fishing communities will not be sold out for the sake of some other deal that can be made with the EU. EU countries are making it clear that they will not accept being locked out of UK waters post Brexit. In return for Britain’s continued membership of the customs union after the transition, the EU will demand continued status quo access to UK waters for its trawlers, even though the UK will have departed from the CFP. The French, Danish, Spanish and Portuguese Governments are under particular pressure to deliver for their fleets.

I have an awful lot more to say but only 30 seconds remaining, so I will end on this note. I stand here on behalf of the many fishermen in my constituency—there are a lot in South Dorset—to ask those on the Government Front Bench not to let us down on this issue, and to get us out of the EU totally and utterly. Only then, I believe, can we move to the sunny uplands envisaged by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne.

5.43 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax). I wish to begin my remarks by thanking Associated British Ports in Grimsby for its annual remembrance service, which remembers the Grimsby fishermen on 375 wrecked trawlers that were used as minesweepers in world war one. This week, divers discovered 307 of those that were lost, which have been sitting at the bottom of the sea for the past 100 years. There is a short video about it on the BBC news website. I also thank the Fishermen’s Mission for its continued support for fishermen and their families in Grimsby and for organising the annual lost fishermen’s memorial, which is much appreciated by the community in Grimsby.

I am pleased that the Secretary of State has returned to his seat, because he concluded his comments with his usual flourishing rhetoric. Although that might suit his populist aims, I ask him for a little caution. The promises of the leave campaign followed similar lines, promising populist aims, I ask him for a little caution. The promises of the leave campaign followed similar lines, promising

The Library briefing shows that landings in Grimsby have now reduced to around 4,000 tonnes of shellfish. Tackling my town’s health inequalities, education attainment levels, underinvestment in the public realm, low wages and high unemployment—things that would demonstrate that positive change is coming to my town—surely cannot come from just the two additional trawlers that fishermen have told me they expect to be able to afford to add post Brexit. Surely those two trawlers are not going to change the fortunes of my town, solving years of complex issues of underinvestment and a sense of limited opportunity locally. If the Secretary of State wants to tell me otherwise, I would be grateful to hear him. There needs to be a sense of realism in this debate, rather than leading people down a false road.

I also hope the Secretary of State has had the opportunity to read the responses to the White Paper from Andrew Marr International Ltd, Peter & J. Johnstone Ltd and UK Fisheries Ltd, all organisations that play an essential role in the local Grimsby community. They provide employment in the community and in the fishing industry, investing in vessels and contributing to the country’s economy, as well as its dinner plates.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), who has returned just at the right time, about the importance of the processing sector to my town. It employs some 5,000 people doing everything, from those working in the fish market to those working on the auctions, to the independent traders who take the product around the country and to the filleters, packers, accountants, logisticians, managers and so much more. We really should hear more of their voices in this debate.

The Bill says that fishery and aquaculture products will not be included in a customs arrangement unless there is agreement between the EU and the UK on access to waters and fishing opportunities. Trawler operators in Grimsby have expressed concern to me that it is precisely because of the value of the catch and the benefit to those EU nations’ economies that there is such a desire to keep the two so closely tied. For vessels that are based in the UK and land in the UK, there is little that can persuade them that there is any need to keep the lines of communication and good-natured trading relationships open, but as Grimsby has the benefit of both pelagic and distance fleet interests, particularly in landing, storage and processing, there is a bit of a conflict. The Government must consider carefully the whole UK fleet in all its sizes and purposes.

Where there is commonality, it largely comes through the hard work of the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations, which has taken a realistic and pragmatic view, with the benefit of knowing all levels of the industry well. The NFFO says it accepts that the sustainability of fish and fishing is important—of course if there are no fish, there is no fishing—and it is open to improving further the relationships with science and the broader industry, supporting a review of the quota system and advocating for an adaptive, responsive fisheries policy.

My time has run short very quickly. Concerns have been raised about the Bill, and the current framing provides for east coast vessels to fish in Scottish waters, but it still empowers Marine Scotland to provide the rules under which they fish. The Bill does not give any detail of what that will mean in practice, and there is concern that conditions may be placed on activity that cause unnecessary disadvantage due to issues such as the subtle differences in activity or in the place of landing. It is envisaged that there will be a memorandum of understanding among the devolved nations to agree a template for fishing management activities, but MOUs are not legally binding and can be withdrawn from at any time.

Angela Smith: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is too little detail in this Bill that gives us any idea of certainty in the future?
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We will be going down to five minutes after this speech.

Melanie Onn: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend makes precisely the point that has been raised with me: leaving future rules under which boats may fish to the whims of what is, in effect, a gentleman’s agreement does not provide any assurance or security to the east coast industry. There is a sense of history repeating itself, as the same industry feels that the fisheries concordat has also not served it well and that those who make the decisions have not fully heard the concerns raised by this section of the fishing industry. As an hon. Member for Lowestoft, I remind the House that Lowestoft was previously the fishing capital of the southern North Sea and was the hub of an industry that included many other ports in the region. Fishing has taken place off the East Anglian coast for more than 1,000 years. Lowestoft was previously the fishing capital of the southern North Sea and was the hub of an industry that included many other ports in the region. Today, East Anglia sits next to one of the richest fishing fields in Europe, but little local benefit is derived from it. To revive local fishing, the industry earlier this year formed REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fishing. With support from Waveney and fisheries fund grant for a study that will develop a long-term strategy for the future of the East Anglian industry.

The application was approved earlier this month, and work is just beginning on a project that will help shape a positive and profitable future for the industry as a whole, from the net to the plate. Its objective is to establish how the economic and social benefits of the fishing industry in East Anglia can be best captured and optimised. This exciting project can revive fishing along the East Anglian coast, but to do so it needs the right national policy framework in place, and that is what this Bill needs to provide. From REAF’s perspective, the Bill must provide the following: first, the East Anglian fleet must be able to catch and land sufficient fish so that those working on the boats can earn a reasonable living and can supply local markets, processing and retailing businesses—the existing quota system has treated them shabbily, and it must be reformed.

Secondly, the Bill must ensure that local coastal communities benefit from any increase in catches and landings. The economic link policy, which is in the CFP and which is being transferred to the emerging UK fisheries policy, must have teeth and must actually achieve its objective, rather than remaining a high-minded statement. There is a Lowestoft producer organisation, but its vessels do not land their fish in Lowestoft—they do so in the Netherlands and in Peterhead. We must have more boats landing their catches in East Anglian ports.

Thirdly, the duty to fish sustainably must be ingrained in the Bill’s DNA. Management decisions must be made locally, with local fishermen working closely with local regulators and local scientists using up-to-date local knowledge and science. I acknowledge that many fish stocks have improved in recent years, but we really can do better than we do at present, whereby the current system allows the abhorrent practice of electro-pulse fishing to continue, notwithstanding the evidence that it is devastating fish stocks, wreaking havoc upon the marine environment and preventing local East Anglian fishermen from earning a living.

Credit must go to the team at DEFRA, the Ministers and the officials for drafting the Bill in such a short time. We do not need a Bill that just does the job and ticks the necessary boxes; we need a Bill that lasts the test of time and becomes an exemplar for the promotion of sustainable fishing and the reinvigoration of coastal communities. Like most others here, I have received many representations from organisations and specialists with proposals on how the Bill can be improved. Although it is an enabling Bill and much of the detail will be set out in secondary legislation, I urge the Government to look closely at the proposals that have been put forward and to see how the Bill can be improved.

I re-emphasise that the allocation of quota must be fairer and accessible to all and should take place transparently, rather than in the existing opaque way. That will enable all fishermen from all communities to really benefit from Brexit.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome this Bill, which will hopefully provide the framework for regenerating the Lowestoft and East Anglian fishing industry, which in the past has been an important component part of the local economy. It has sadly declined in recent years, with thousands of jobs being lost, but with the right support, the right management system and the right policies, the industry can be rebuilt, we can attract inward investments and the industry can play a key role in the regeneration of coastal communities, not just in East Anglia but around the UK.

Fishing has taken place off the East Anglian coast for more than 1,000 years. Lowestoft was previously the fishing capital of the southern North Sea and was the hub of an industry that included many other ports in the region. Today, East Anglia sits next to one of the richest fishing fields in Europe, but little local benefit is derived from it. To revive local fishing, the industry earlier this year formed REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fishing. With support from Waveney District Council, an application was submitted to the Marine Management Organisation for a European maritime and fisheries fund grant for a study that will develop a long-term strategy for the future of the East Anglian industry.

The application was approved earlier this month, and work is just beginning on a project that will help shape a positive and profitable future for the industry as a whole, from the net to the plate. Its objective is to establish how the economic and social benefits of the fishing industry in East Anglia can be best captured and optimised. This exciting project can revive fishing along the East Anglian coast, but to do so it needs the right national policy framework in place, and that is what this Bill needs to provide. From REAF’s perspective, the Bill must provide the following: first, the East Anglian fleet must be able to catch and land sufficient fish so that those working on the boats can earn a reasonable living and can supply local markets, processing and retailing businesses—the existing quota system has treated them shabbily, and it must be reformed.

Secondly, the Bill must ensure that local coastal communities benefit from any increase in catches and landings. The economic link policy, which is in the
£2.6 million, has South Korea among its primary destinations. That trade is enabled by an EU extended trade agreement. To state the bleeding obvious, the UK currently has no trade agreements with Korea directly. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for International Trade to facilitate the future of this important local industry?

Tariff barriers would have an immense impact on viability, but non-tariff barriers could also be truly devastating. Welsh fishermen’s spokespeople have urged me to ask the Minister, given the vulnerability of fishermen’s livelihoods to any hold-ups in the transporting of their produce to European and worldwide markets alike, what plans he has to set aside financial support for inshore, small-vessel operators, in preparation for the possibility of a no-deal Brexit.

Before quota responsibilities were devolved to the Welsh Government, which is currently the case, the Westminster Government authorised the sale of 88% of Welsh fishing quotas to Spanish businesses. They were content for the market to operate unimpeded and condoned the loss of resources for the Welsh fishing industry. Indeed, only 10% of Wales’s quota is currently held in Welsh waters, and only 27% of the quota is even caught in UK waters. That raises the question: why did Westminster permit quotas to be at the mercy of global businesses? How can the Minister assure hard-working fishing families that this will never happen again?

Wales being let down by Westminster is not an unfamiliar tale, but the responsibility for quotas was transferred to Cardiff. The Welsh Government could have made a stand for Welsh fishing and moved to install a moratorium on the sale of any more fishing quotas for businesses outside Wales, as the Scottish Government did in 2014. Instead, after we have left the EU and the withdrawal Act kicks in—with the consent of the Labour Government in Cardiff, I hasten to add—Wales will have gifted back to Westminster the legal capacity to do that.

I seek clarity on the following points. How will the Minister consult the devolved Administrations and what will be the nature of the joint decision-making mechanisms that he surely intends to establish? How does he intend to ensure that consent means consent and not really just the right to be told? If, as appears to be the case, the Welsh Government will now have some responsibility for all Welsh waters—namely from the coast to 6 miles, from there to 12 miles and now, at last, to the Welsh median line—this is indeed to be welcomed. I ask whether the financial resources will also reflect these additional waters. How will maritime and fisheries funding allocations be allocated after 2020 and can he confirm that that will be needs-based?

The reality of the Government’s position is that fishing opportunities and the withdrawal agreement’s political declaration remain utterly uncertain. How much of the fishing fleet’s livelihood are the Government happy to barter? Fishing communities seek clarity and certainty. The Minister’s Government presently offer scant comfort.

6 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a great honour to be able to speak in this very important debate. As has previously been said, this is the first time for many decades that this Chamber has been able to debate primary legislation relating to our fisheries.

The fishing communities that I have the honour of representing have a long-standing and proud tradition of fishing that goes back many, many generations. In fact, many of today’s fishermen are the sons and grandsons of fishermen. I have two primary fishing communities in my constituency: in Newquay and in Mevagissey. The fishing port of Mevagissey is the second largest in Cornwall and, in many ways, is doing well and is growing. The age of its fishermen is younger than average, and those fishermen are active and looking to the future. I remind the Secretary of State again that he did offer to meet the fishermen of Mevagissey. Virtually every time I speak to them, they remind me that this offer was made, so it would be incredibly good if he came sooner rather than later.

It is a sad but well-established fact that our fishing communities have not fared well under the common fisheries policy. The industry was sacrificed in the 1970s as a bargaining chip when we joined the Common Market, and that sense of betrayal still runs very deep within our fishing communities. We should not underestimate how strongly those feelings are still felt today. Therefore, it is understandable that many fishermen in Cornwall are still suspicious of the Government. Although some very good commitments have been made to our fishing communities in recent months, it is absolutely vital that we see those words turned into actions and firm decisions and that we do not let down our fishing communities once again.

The CFP has failed effectively to manage our fish stocks and has all but destroyed the economic competitiveness of our UK fishing industry. Around two thirds of all fish caught in UK waters are now caught by non-UK vessels, and, of some fish stocks, around 85% of the quota is awarded to non-UK boats. By taking back control of our fishing waters and by taking back control of our quotas, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put right the wrongs that have been imposed on our fishing industry.

I welcome the clear commitments made by the Government and by the Prime Minister personally when she came, infamously, to Mevagissey last May, at the very start of the election campaign, before our manifesto was launched. She met the fishermen and made some very clear commitments to them, and that was welcome, but it is absolutely vital that we do not again sell out our fishermen.

We are an island nation, and being an island nation presents a number of big challenges. One of the huge opportunities that we have as an island nation should be access to our fishing waters and to reap the rewards that that provides for our nation. That is what leaving the EU and leaving the common fisheries policy will enable us to do. I therefore very much welcome this Bill. It is essential that it is enacted so that we have the mechanism in place to manage our own fishing waters once we leave the EU. This will mean that we will have everything in place to do that if we do end up with a clean global Brexit come the end of March.

We need to look carefully at the matter of discards, which is the most common concern raised by my local fishermen. Discards are an utter and shameful waste of our fishing stocks. As other hon. Members have said, those rules mean that we are not able to know exactly what the stocks are, so it is important that we get it right and put the mechanisms in place to deal with the issue.
I have great admiration for both the Secretary of State and the Fisheries Minister, and I know that they are very much on the fishermen’s side, so I would say to them that we have to ensure that we see through the commitments we have made to our fishing industry that we do not sell it out again for access to markets and that we give it the fair and right opportunity that it should have to reap the rewards of our UK fishing waters.

6.5 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Before I get into my speech, I will confess my three interests in this Bill. First, like the Secretary of State, I had family—my grandfather, not my father—who worked in the fishing industry. My grandfather worked behind the wet fish counter in Tonyandy and in Barry. Secondly, I am a very keen angler myself; and thirdly, I am implacably opposed to Brexit, and this Bill and the fisheries debate more broadly is the greatest example I can think of to demonstrate the hollowness of the claims that were made by the Brexiteers, such as the Secretary of State, as well as the hollowness of the promises that he is holding out again today to fishing industries and fishermen right across the country.

On both sides of the Brexit debate, the issue of fisheries illustrates what a dreadful discussion we had, because the remain side ought to admit that the CFP is one of the great failures of the EU. It does not work environmentally and it has not worked for the fishing industry in our country or elsewhere, and we should acknowledge that. We should not seek to stay in or replicate the CFP; we should be trying to reform it. But the biggest deception, of course, was on behalf of the Brexiteers: the promise that leaving the CFP would allow us to take back control of our seas. It is a wonderful phrase, which we have heard from the Secretary of State today, but the seas that we are talking about—the Irish sea, the North sea and the English channel—are shared with the countries on the other side of them. The fish we get out of those seas are sometimes landed and processed on the shores on the other side of those seas, and the markets we rely on are very often on the other side of those seas. That exposes the hollowness of both the Brexiteers’ claims and many promises made in the Secretary of State’s rhetoric today.

The hollowness is also exposed by a paucity of detail because, frankly, this Bill is long on rhetoric and short on detail. The reason that it is short on detail is that very little is agreed in respect of the future of our fisheries. There are lots of promises, as there were lots of promises in the White Paper in July this year, but the truth is that almost nothing is determined in respect of the future nature of our fisheries and of our agreement. In fact, throughout the withdrawal agreement, it is very clear that nothing is agreed. On page 311 of the deal, it is stated very clearly that

“(‘fishery and aquaculture products’), shall not be covered…unless an agreement”

is established. I think that the Minister wants to get that agreement by June 2020, but there is no guarantee that that will happen. As many fellow Brexit supporters of the Secretary of State have pointed out to him and to Front Benchers today, in the intervening period—during the transition period—we will actually lose influence and leverage in respect of our fisheries.

Article 130 on page 206 of the withdrawal agreement states:

“As regards the fixing of fishing opportunities within the transition period, the United Kingdom shall be consulted in respect of the fishing opportunities…the Union shall offer the opportunity to the United Kingdom to provide comments on the Annual Communication”.

It also says that the UK shall be invited to the “relevant…fora”. We will be consulted with, we will have the opportunity to comment and we will be invited, but we will not actually be official participants in the decision making—the key decisions on the size and scale of the quotas which, according to the Secretary of State, we ought to see taken back under our control. All that is a clear indication of the hollowness of the claim that we would exercise greater sovereignty as a result of our leaving the European Union.

The Secretary of State, I am not sure whether deliberately, spoke out of both sides of his mouth today. He said that we are going to be taking back control in order to exercise greater observance of the sustainable yields that we have ignored for many, many years when in the common fisheries policy, and at the same time he said that we were going to be increasing our fish catch. Those two things, I say respectfully to him, cannot both be true. We cannot, in future, be more observant of the scientific advice about what are the sustainable yields we can take from our stocks while at the same time taking more fish from our seas. That is the biggest and most egregious example of the fib that is being told to fishermen across this country. I hope that during the passage of the Bill the Secretary of State will clear up some of these misconceptions and is very honest with people about what Brexit could mean.

6.10 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), because he referred to the restrictions of other oceans and other controlled waters, but I can tell him that actually, when a fisherman from Newlyn launches out to sea, they have 200 miles to go before they get into any sort of international waters. At the moment, as we have heard, they are allowed to access only 7% of the cod in those waters, and so it simply makes mathematical sense that if they get more share, they will get more fish.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) said, it is a long time since Members—a Member for St Ives, for example—have had the privilege of talking about primary legislation around a UK fisheries Bill. I am grateful to the Secretary of State and the Minister for—certainly in the case of the Minister—their repeated visits to Newlyn. They were both visitors to the largest Cornish fishing community by a considerable measure. I would suggest, although I do not want to upset my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, that the tragedy of discord is that we probably discard more fish from Newlyn fishermen than are caught in Mevagissey. However, that is something we can discuss on another day.

Steve Double: It is great quality fish.

Derek Thomas: There is great quality fish from Newlyn as well. Actually, that is an important point. The quality of fish caught around the Cornish coast is significant,
and it is in demand from Europe. I therefore have no doubt that we will get to the point where Europe will continue to want and buy Cornish fish.

My local fishermen welcome this Bill, broadly because its primary objective is to promote sustainable fisheries management. They know more than anyone that sustainable fisheries management arrangements are the right thing, demonstrating a respect for the oceans and its contents and delivering a future for an essential food source and for skilled employment. They know that the UK, particularly Cornwall, is already a world leader in sustainable fisheries management. Fishermen in Cornwall, through the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation, already work on many fronts to promote conservation initiatives and safe working practice and to demonstrate their commitment to realising a sustainable future.

It is important to remind the House of the benefits of Brexit to our fishermen. We will be an independent coastal state. We will have control of access to UK waters and ensure that British fishermen get a fair deal and are able to catch more because of a commitment to sustain stocks. We will revive coastal communities. Perhaps the Secretary of State could talk to the Prime Minister, because we are concerned about permanent workers from overseas potentially being excluded through a new immigration policy, which would have a detrimental impact on our fishing sector. It would be great to get clarity on whether people from overseas who work full-time in fishing can keep their jobs. We will also be able to maintain and develop the UK industry’s role as world leaders in sustainable fisheries policy.

The Government must not extend the common fisheries policy beyond 2020 or adopt an interim arrangement allowing the EU to set rules binding UK fisheries in any sort of extended implementation period or backstop. Furthermore, the Secretary of State must confirm today that the Government will not sacrifice the potential of Brexit for the British fishing industry in any way and that they will reject any future proposals from the EU that seek to wrestle away control of access to UK waters. Should the Government back down on their promises, the Bill cannot be delivered, and we will have failed and betrayed our fishing sector.

My fishermen are watching this closely, and they understand the risks of not getting this right. They are paying their mortgages, feeding their families and paying their taxes because of the fishing they do day in, day out, and we should take that seriously when considering their futures.

The Cornish Fish Producers Organisation has set out three simple asks of the Government. First, it asks the Government to establish a formal advisory council to guide policy, promote collaboration between central Government, devolved Administrations and the industry and allow for ongoing dialogue in a naturally variable industry. It is important that fishermen and fishing experts are sat around the table in that advisory council.

Secondly, the CFPO asks the Secretary of State to ensure a practical approach to sustainable fisheries management. Maximum sustainable yields—a key part of the regime—could fail in the same way that the CFP has failed, so it is important that we look at many other options to secure a good, sustainable fishing industry. Finally, the CFPO asks the Secretary of State to set out a dispute resolution mechanism, so that when things go wrong, they can be properly resolved.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in any fishing debate, as I have done every year that I have been in the House. I would like to begin by thanking the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee for the incredible work it has put into the Bill. It was a pleasure to work on submissions to the inquiry, as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and to have the Committee over to Northern Ireland to see at first hand the success and the needs of the industry in Portavogie in my constituency. I was also pleased to have input from Ardglass and Kilkeel, and I am pleased to see a representative from the Anglo North Irish Fish Producers Organisation in the Gallery, to oversee what we are saying.

I have been contacted by a number of fishermen and fishing bodies, and all have welcomed certain aspects of the Bill, such as the powers for the UK to set quotas and control access over who may fish in UK waters and under what conditions, the expectation of bilateral agreements with the EU, Norway and others with which it shares stocks and the Secretary of State in a position to endorse the content of those agreements. It is important to get that right.

It is also important to ensure that the principle of equal access is upheld when issuing any additional quota gained from leaving the EU. It is essential for Northern Ireland that quota is allocated according to individual vessels active in the fishery or by existing fixed quota allocations. While there is support for the principle of equal access for UK vessels to operate in any of the waters within the UK exclusive economic zone, there is some concern that these freedoms could be compromised if devolved Administrations introduce their own separate measures. Other Members have said that, and I want to reinforce it.

Ian Paisley: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jim Shannon: No, I will not.

I would like to briefly talk about clause 10. I would add that all licences granted under the authority of the Bill—in other words, those issued from the date of the Act coming into force onwards—are non-transferable. I am an advocate of reviewing the licence system, and I believe that it would be a mistake for us to fail to close the loophole that caused massive issues to begin with.

The Bill sets ambitions and measures to minimise discards. The National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations is one body that contacted me to highlight the belief that reducing discards is an important element of sustainable fisheries management, and it is pleased to see the Government taking a positive and workable approach. Much good work has been done. The Government should establish a formal advisory council to guide policy, promote collaboration between central Government, devolved Administrations and the industry and allow for ongoing dialogue in a naturally variable industry.

It is understandable that the Bill refers to maximum sustainable yields as an approach to sustainable fisheries management. However, if MSY is set as a rigid timebound
objective, it will, as with the CFP, prove unworkable. Instead, the UK must develop an approach to sustainable fisheries management that learns from the failings of the CFP. The NFFO is calling for a more balanced and workable approach, with oversight from the advisory council, and I concur with that.

There is still nothing in the Bill to address the access to labour issues. The natural counter-argument is that labour is outside the scope of the Bill, but it is in fact a critical pillar of the sustainability objective. I believe we can and must address that matter through the Bill, and an amendment can and should be tabled to incorporate access to labour.

I see the Minister in his place, and just for the record, he and I have had discussions on various occasions about the voisine agreement, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned earlier. We have brought it up on every occasion we have met in this House, and in our meetings the voisine agreement has been at the forefront of my mind and of his. He has told us in the past that it is his intention to pursue this legal matter through the courts and to ensure the waters covered by the voisine agreement that belong to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are returned. Will the Minister respond to that in a very positive way?

In my last minute, I want to quote the words of a constituent:

"Setting aside the complex and controversial questions surrounding parliamentary approval for the withdrawal agreement, much still hinges on the negotiations ahead. The UK’s legal status has altered and its leverage in fisheries negotiations has dramatically changed but unless that new status is used to address the gross distortions in quota shares, fishermen will question what it has all been for."

My constituent says there are

all the fishermen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

"in this second round, will expect our negotiators"—

"to be as tough, astute, and hard-nosed as they need to be to realise the benefits of our new status as an independent coastal state."

Good times are ahead. The good times will come, and they will come with some abundance after 29 March. We look forward to it.

6.21 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Indeed, I am doing so for the first time.

We are all aware that since joining what was then the EEC, the UK fishing industry has steadily declined from landings of 1 million tonnes to about 400,000 tonnes annually. Landings turnover of £1 million and boasting the best crab in the country, Selsey’s small but active fishing industry has about 15 boats, mostly of under-10 metre vessels but with four of over-10 metres. Similarly, across the UK our fishing fleet predominantly comprises smaller vessels. Only about a fifth of our vessels are over-10 metres long. However, today we can see large vessels from France and Belgium fishing just 6 miles off the coast of Selsey. The vast majority of our local fishing is done within a 10-mile radius, so this is rather unwelcome.

We hope that change is on the horizon, as this Bill will set out the framework to make the UK an independent coastal state once again. With that, comes the ability to control our exclusive economic zone, reinstating our sovereign right to explore, exploit, conserve and manage our seas. This change will mean that foreign vessels will have to seek permission to fish here. In cases such as Selsey, I hope that will also mean we can provide some breathing space so our local fleet can access near-shore fishing grounds without competition.

One of the biggest changes brought about by this Bill will be our ability to implement a fair quota system, as currently it is anything but. As has been mentioned, in the English channel, the French take 83% of the cod; by contrast, UK fishers can take only 9%. It was therefore no surprise to hear the French President and his Europe Minister calling over the past few days for guaranteed access to our waters.

The UK has led the way to sustainable fisheries. We have been instrumental in setting rates at levels that will deliver a maximum sustainable yield by 2020, ensuring that species numbers remain stable for future generations. Self-regulation provides the opportunity to be more flexible and responsive to species population changes, allowing fishermen to take advantage of increases in fish populations. It has already been suggested that quotas for rays and skates could be increased by as much as 20%.

A big cause for concern within the industry is how to get more people into fishing. A New Economics Foundation report has highlighted that one of the biggest barriers for new entries is cost. New fishers willing to join the industry are required to purchase vessels with existing track records if they are to access quotas. That is a significant obstacle for those wishing to enter the profession, and it has the tendency to mean that older vessels are overvalued. I hope that in the near future the Government can work with organisations such as the NFFO to establish taster days and promote apprenticeships in this vital industry, which we can and should regenerate.

This debate is not about the disadvantage of the past but the opportunity of the future. The change ahead of us will reinvigorate our fishing industry and create prosperity for coastal communities, while continuing to ensure our fisheries are sustainable for future generations. I believe we can do all this and more, if we develop strategies to get more people into the industry who will help to bring in a new era of growth for our fishing industry.

British fisherman have faced decades of disadvantage, but by ensuring that our seas are once again sovereign we will turn the tides. I will end with a quotation from the president of the NFFO, Tony Delahunty; as he is a constituent of mine, he said:

“The National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisation’s view is that the withdrawal and future agreement…is an extremely
important first step towards a new future for the UK as an independent coastal state and are keen to ensure that there are no links between fishing rights and trade in future negotiations.”

6.26 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). I, too, welcome the Bill as it is a clear indication that, after 40 years, we will leave the EU in March, and the UK will once again become an independent coastal state, responsible for managing its own waters. In Newhaven in my constituency, the fishing industry has been in decline for decades. A once thriving fishing port now sees its local fishermen away for long periods, often working for larger fishing fleets and unable to make a living independently. That is the legacy of the CFP.

The Bill provides a ray of hope for the industry, but let us be under no illusion: the changes in the Bill cannot be negotiated away as part of the withdrawal agreement or future trading relationship arrangements. Failure to secure the contents of the Bill will consign the UK fishing industry to the annals of history. I welcome many of the measures in the Bill, but particular highlights for me are the provision revoking the automatic access rights of EU vessels and the new powers for the UK to set catch limits, revoking EU powers to set EU quotas for our waters.

I have some concerns, however, that I wish to raise with the Minister. While the Bill will restore control of our waters, many people are concerned that the withdrawal agreement and, in particular, the future trading relationship paper could override the Bill and that countries such as France and Spain could demand access in future negotiations. In the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we heard evidence during our fishing inquiry that the UK will remain in the CFP until 31 December 2020, but we will leave the EU before that. I made the point to the Secretary of State that we have concerns that although the Minister may attend the annual fisheries negotiation in December 2019, he will not have a say to ensure that our fishing rights are not overruled in the transition period. It is really important to have clarity on that point. I would welcome being wrong about it, but we are nervous.

As my hon. Friend the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) have said, we would also like the reassurance of the Bill including the date when we will actually leave. We want to see the date of 31 December 2020 written into the Bill. We would also like to see the insertion of an economic link into the Bill so that we are clear what we mean by “British”. Fishing for Leave has suggested that any British vessel should be 60% UK crewed and 60% UK-owned, retaining 60% of the catch landed. It is vital to ensure compliance with the term “British” if we are to deliver economic benefits to the communities we have heard so much about today. It is essential that we avoid multinationals buying up our entitlement.

Clauses 9 and 10 will grant powers to the devolved Administrations, but Northern Ireland does not have a devolved Administration, and it could be a while before one is restored. We would like reassurance that while Northern Ireland does not have an Assembly, civil servants will be given powers to prepare for the implementation of the Bill while an Executive is restored.

Following on from the points made by the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) about the voisinage agreement, the historical reciprocal arrangements are not in place and fishermen in Northern Ireland are suffering as a result. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said to the Select Committee this morning that that was a matter for DEFRA, so I am putting it back to DEFRA Ministers now. Either we need to challenge the Republic of Ireland Government to open up those fishing waters to fishermen in Northern Ireland, or in this Bill we can take back control and say that the Republic of Ireland cannot access UK waters until that dispute is resolved. I would very much appreciate it if the Secretary of State or the Minister were to comment on that. I will be grateful if these issues can be addressed either in Committee or on Report so that we do not have to table our own amendments.

6.30 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure and privilege to speak in this debate. Similarly to when we considered the Agriculture Bill earlier in the Session, this is the first opportunity for this Chamber of the United Kingdom Parliament to debate a future policy—this time for our fishermen and fishing industry. Communities such as Buckie, Cullen, Lossiemouth and Burghhead do not have the same number of fishing boats as they once did, but they still have an extremely strong link to the fishing industry and they look at our debates in this Chamber very closely.

I very much support this enabling Bill, which has widespread support throughout the industry. The Ministers and their team have done a good job in bringing it to this stage. We all want to ensure that we have control over our waters and regenerate the coastal communities that have suffered in the past. There is a great deal to welcome in the Bill.

I want to spend a bit of time looking at the utter tosh—that is the only way I can describe it—that we have heard from the Scottish National party during this debate. We heard from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), who is not in the Chamber. He took us back to 1972, 11 years before I was even born. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) took us back a number of years ago when Alex Salmond was putting forward legislation. The SNP has not mentioned him recently, so it is interesting to hear his name used again. In an intervention, I took the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith back to last year’s general election—the most recent election—to find the most recent credible position of the SNP. The SNP’s position then, on which all their candidates stood for election, was to go back into the common fisheries policy, and she confirmed that in response to my intervention.

Deidre Brock rose—

Douglas Ross: I am sorry, but because of the time—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), but is now refusing to
take an intervention from her. Is that in order, Mr Deputy Speaker, or a convention of the House? [Interruption.] Courtesy and decency.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The answer is yes, it is in order. Members do not have to give way. What is normal is that if you do mention a Member’s name and that Member then comes back, it is up to the Member speaking to decide whether to give way. Normally, they do give way, but I cannot force any individual Member; it is up to Mr Ross whether he wishes to.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has a deaf ear, because I said I would let the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith intervene. I will come to her in a minute, if she has patience.

The hon. Lady confirmed that the SNP’s position is to go back into the CFP on re-joining the European Union but, she said, in their terms. I would like to give way to her so that she can tell us what those terms are. What is the SNP going to tell the EU that it would like to negotiate on the CFP, and what is it going to give away? A negotiation needs give and take, so what would it give to the European Union on that?

Deidre Brock: I would just like to quote directly from page 29 of the SNP’s 2017 general election manifesto: “We will continue, in all circumstances, to demand the scrapping or fundamental reform of the Common Fisheries Policy and support Scottish control of Scottish fisheries, as we have done for many years.”

Douglas Ross: That is page 29, but there is absolutely no information on how the SNP would do that or what it would do. It is absolutely farcical—you have no plan for how you will go forward on the CFP; you will simply go back into it and do as you are told.

Other things we have not heard are—[Interruption.] Oh, come on, please. The hon. Lady mentioned nothing about the Scottish Government’s report that says that the fishing industry will benefit from £540 million and see an extra 5,000 jobs in Scotland as we come out of the CFP. The SNP will not mention that, because it wants to go back into the CFP.

I agree with a lot of things said by a number of Members—including the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael)—about the problems that the Government’s immigration policies are causing for fishermen. I held a Westminster Hall debate on the matter at which a number of Members spoke. [Interruption.] If SNP Members would stop barracking me, I may be able to answer their questions. This is something for which I believe there is cross-party support. I believe that the Government could make small changes to ensure that we get the right people into our—

Michael Gove: Is it not an unerring truth in this House that anyone who speaks the truth gets barracked by Scottish National party Members? They are not interested in debate, the facts, or answering the questions that my hon. Friend is putting; they are interested only in a separatist circus that threatens the jobs and livelihoods of the people they fail to represent.

Pete Wishart rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot intervene on an intervention.

Douglas Ross: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that intervention because—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for a Government Minister who has been asked three times for help in lobbying the Home Office about this problem for Scottish fisheries, but who has done nothing about it, to get up and not mention that, yet to make a political point on that very issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, as the hon. Gentleman well knows.

Douglas Ross: I just love how we rile SNP Members so much that they have to make fake points of order to try to disrupt the flow of my speech. However, they will not disrupt the flow of my speech when I am criticising the SNP.

I will mention the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar again. He referred to a Westminster Hall debate in which a lot of Conservative MPs spoke. The reason why we heard from a lot of Conservative MPs—and Scottish Conservative MPs—was that the SNP lost so many seats in Scotland in so many coastal communities. The SNP lost 21 seats in Scotland because it would not stand up for the fishermen in our country, and we see exactly what it is doing. Those people know that Scottish Conservatives will be standing up for them—[Interruption.] I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman as he continues to speak from a sedentary position.

It is extremely important in this debate that we have a robust exchange of views. While there is much in the Bill to support, I have to use this speech as an opportunity to raise my concerns about the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. Many Members have set out their concerns about the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, and particularly the first bullet point on page 4 of the outline political declaration. I have to say that I share those concerns. I worry that we may be out of the common fisheries policy but still be in some way tied to a common fisheries policy, I could not support that. I said at a public meeting in Buckie back in March—it was widely reported in both The Banffshire Advertiser and The Northern Scot, so I am sure those at the highest level of government are aware of my concerns—that if a deal did not deliver for fishermen in Moray, in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, I could not support it. My position today remains the same.

6.38 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Thank you very much for letting me speak so early in the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not quite know how I am going to follow that last speech—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I assure the hon. Gentleman that he is lucky I have called him at all, given the time.

Andrew Bowie: I am fully aware of that, Mr Deputy Speaker—I know I am chasing my luck. I start by paying tribute to two individuals who, when I was advising on fisheries issues in the European Parliament, did much to educate me in the world of fisheries, which to many is a foreign language. One of them is sitting in the Gallery this afternoon—Simon Collins, the CEO of the Shetland Fishermen’s Federation—and the other is a constituent of mine from the beautiful fishing village of Stonehaven, Mr Mike Park, who today received an OBE at the palace for his services to marine conservation. It is therefore more of an honour than usual, for professional, personal and geographical reasons, to speak in this debate, as we set a new and historic course, for the first time since 1973 setting our own regulations for management of the seas and determining who may fish in our waters and on what terms.

I strongly associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State for Scotland, who, outwith this place, has said he is not interested in playing the resignation soap opera. [Laughter] No, he is not. He has not resigned because, unlike SNP Members, he cares about fishermen and is working hard on this issue. He thinks it far too important to play politics with, which is something I wish the SNP would remember. As my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said, it might be why there are far fewer of them in the House than there were before the general election. If there was ever a time to focus on outcomes for Britain’s and Scotland’s fishing industry, that time is now. We face a sea of opportunity. The House today has a chance to develop a tangible legal framework in which the UK can operate as an independent coastal state, free from the restrictions of the hated CFP.

I am conscious that today’s debate is on the Fisheries Bill, not wider EU relations—not that anyone would know it—but for the Bill to be worth the paper it is printed on, colleagues need to take seriously the reaction of Bill, not wider EU relations—not that anyone would have to educate me in the world of fisheries, which to many is a foreign language. One of them is sitting in the Gallery this afternoon—Simon Collins, the CEO of the Shetland Fishermen’s Federation—and the other is a constituent of mine from the beautiful fishing village of Stonehaven, Mr Mike Park, who today received an OBE at the palace for his services to marine conservation. It is therefore more of an honour than usual, for professional, personal and geographical reasons, to speak in this debate, as we set a new and historic course, for the first time since 1973 setting our own regulations for management of the seas and determining who may fish in our waters and on what terms.

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I am conscious that today’s debate is on the Fisheries Bill, not wider EU relations—not that anyone would know it—but for the Bill to be worth the paper it is printed on, colleagues need to take seriously the reaction of those shrill siren voices in the environmental lobby suggesting that British control of our own waters will lead to a diminution of standards or a reduced commitment to the marine environment. I would remind them that it was the British Government who were most vocal on the need to implement a discard ban across the EU and who have driven up standards and pushed other countries to be as committed to sustainable fisheries as us and our fishing industry. The UK has always advocated a science-based approach to fisheries management and argued that total allowable catches should be in line with the CFP’s objective and be proposed and set at levels that are at least moving towards maximum sustainable yield-based exploitation rates. That said, DEFRA and the devolved Assemblies could do more to help fishermen and fishing organisations at the quayside to implement some of these environmental policies, as our MEPs demanded in 2015.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Does the hon. Gentleman still stand by the words he uttered on 27 February 2018, at about 3.22 pm—as Hansard helpfully tells us? He said:

“That is why we cannot let fishermen down now, and why before my election I signed a pledge committing me to do what I can to ensure that the UK is taken out of the common fisheries policy at the earliest available opportunity. That means 11 pm on 29 March 2019.”—[Official Report, 27 February 2018; Vol. 636, c. 304WH.] Does he stand by those words?

Andrew Bowie: Of course, I still stand by those words. We will leave the CFP on 29 March 2019 and will be negotiating as an independent coastal state from December 2020, none of which would be the case if the SNP had its way. If it did, we would be back in the EU, as full members of the CFP, because—I hate to educate the SNP—a country cannot be a member of the EU and not a member of the CFP, with all that that entails.

Mr Speaker, I urge all colleagues to back this fantastic Bill, as I am being coughed at by the Whip to my left.

6.43 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to sum up what has been a fantastic debate with good contributions on both sides of the House, and I echo the words expressed across the House about those fishermen who risk their lives to catch the fish we put on our tables. In particular, I add my thanks to the rescue services, the coastguard and the RNLI, who are true heroes indeed.

We do not oppose the Bill. We know that the UK needs a fishing system outside the common fisheries policy after we leave the EU—we do not dispute that—but it is clear that the Government still have some way to go before the Bill satisfies both sides of the House. The Labour party intends to work with the Government to ensure we have a good Bill that is fit for purpose. Fisheries Bills do not often trouble the House of Commons so we need to make it a good one.

There are some good things in the Bill, but there are far too many missing pieces. It smacks of a measure hurriedly prepared and pushed out too quickly by a Government who were aware of the approaching deadline of Brexit. It needed more work before its publication, and it would have benefited from a round of pre-legislative scrutiny, but as Ministers chose not to do that, I think...
they should not be surprised that there have been so many proposals for amendments today and that there will be more in Committee.

The Bill gives the Government a chance to make real the promises made by the Leave campaign. So far, big promises have not been matched by delivery. Fishing communities, in Plymouth and across the country, do not want grand promises; they need honesty, and clarity from the Government, and they want those to be delivered.

Mrs Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Luke Pollard: I am sorry, but there have been enough interventions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) made a superb opening speech, but I want to reiterate the concerns that have been expressed by Members on both sides of the House.

Mrs Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Luke Pollard: I will keep going. I apologise, but the hon. Lady has had enough chances.

The Bill constitutes a missed opportunity—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to start afresh and create a truly world-class, sustainable fisheries policy. We need to get this right, but as it stands, the Bill fails in a number of critical ways. It fails to provide a fair deal for our small fleet, or attempt to break up large monopolies in the fishing industry. It fails to regenerate coastal communities and provide the renaissance that our coastal towns need. It fails to create a vision for the UK to have the most sustainable fisheries in the world. It fails to ensure frictionless access to the single market; indeed, given the Prime Minister’s bad deal, it poses the risk of tariffs on our fish, and we do not want tax on our fish. It also fails to ensure that there is supply-chain fairness across the board.

As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), while in theory the Bill gives us greater access to our waters, it says nothing meaningful about redistributing quota more fairly across the British fleet. The fixed quota allocation system has been heavily criticised on both sides of the House during the debate, and it is unfair, but it has not been updated since the 1990s. If I had not been updated since the 1990s, I would still have bleached blond hair, wear cargo trousers and believe that wet-look gel is a good idea. Times change, and so must our fishing regulation. As a result of the existing system, ownership of quota has become increasingly consolidated in the hands of a few, and we need to change that. We need to distribute quota so that it goes back into the hands of the many.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington said earlier, more than a quarter of the UK’s fishing quota is owned or controlled by just five families on the UK. We need to reward best practice, not ignore that problem.

The UK has always had the ability to allocate quota to reward particular types of fishing practice or to support broader social and economic gains, but has chosen not to do so in a broad, meaningful way. Ministers have reallocated too little quota, although they have reallocated some. Labour wants smaller boats to be given a greater share of quota after Brexit. Small boats are the backbone of our fishing industry, the small and medium-sized enterprises of the sector, and they need our backing. The small-scale fishing fleet generally uses low-impact gear, and creates significantly more jobs per tonne of fish landed than the large-scale sector. In the UK, the under 10-metre small-scale fleet represents more than 70% of English fishing boats and 65% of direct employment in fishing, and it should be supported.

We have heard that recreational fishing would have huge potential with better management, and I agree. There is not enough in the Bill that values that sector—not yet, at least. More recreational fishing and more sustainable fisheries depend on better science to plug the gap in data. That means more baseline stock levels for non-quota species such as cuttlefish. If ours are to be the most sustainable fisheries in the world, we need to have the best science in the world. Indeed, the data deficiency that we currently see in our fisheries is one of the reasons why many of our fisheries cannot market their fish as sustainable. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), we need to ensure that maximum sustainable yield is achieved by 2020, and that that date is put in the Bill.

There have been many good contributions from across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) mentioned the governance gap and the too frequent reliance on Henry VIII powers in this Bill, and that needs to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) talked about doubling the size of the co-operative economy, and in fishing we have a proud record of co-operators; that should be supported. We need to ensure not only that EMFF funds are replaced—with every single penny replaced, not cut—but also that the other funding arrangements, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth, are put in place. Local government need to ensure that they have the funds to invest in our fishing as well. As the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) said, we must make sure we have a passion about fish, not just a passion about fishing. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said we need to talk more about processing, which has the lion’s share of employment in the fishing sector.

My party does support this Bill, but we believe it needs more work in a considerable number of areas. Serious concerns have been raised on both sides of this House about fairness, funding, sustainability and trade. The fishing industry has been given grand promises by the Environment Secretary, and many others besides, only to have some of them broken time after time. While I believe that the Fisheries Minister is honest in his efforts, I fear that those higher up in his Government are selling him out and that our fishing industries have been sold out, too. That must not be the case with this Bill: no more betrayals; no more grand promises. To the
Minister I say be up front and frank with fishers about the difficulties and opportunities, because I have not met a fisherman who is not equally frank, up front and honest in their response.

I genuinely believe that there is scope for this Bill to be improved with cross-party working, and I put the Government on notice that if we cannot achieve those improvements, they should not necessarily count on our support in future parliamentary stages.

6.51 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): We have had a good debate with many lively exchanges, particularly during the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the DEFRA officials who have worked incredibly hard to get the Bill to this point, to our officials in the Marine Management Organisation, who have done considerable planning on enforcement, and to CEFAS, our science agency, which is truly the best in the world in fisheries science.

The Secretary of State was generous in giving way in his opening speech, and indeed the debate drifted some distance from the contents of the Bill. I will not be giving way, however, as I want to use the short time available to address as many points as possible.

I welcome the fact that the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) supports the Bill. She made some specific points about reallocating quota. We have been clear in our White Paper that we want to move to a different method of allocating quota to the UK fleet. We have also set out proposals in the White Paper to allocate new quota on a different methodology so that it does not simply follow FQA—fixed quota allocation—unit allocations. In the longer term, we could obviously change the allocation keys on the existing FQAs, but the legal advice based on case law is that that would have to be done gradually over a period of time.

It is also important to note that some of the figures bandied about in terms of who owns what quota can be misleading, as there is a huge difference between the small inshore vessels, which are limited largely to the 0 to 12 mile zone, and the pelagic fleet, which has huge vessels with huge capital investment, and for which mackerel is by far the largest stock.

The hon. Lady made some points about sustainability and the discard ban set out in clause 1. She suggested that that is weaker than we have now, but I can tell her that the wording we use in clause 1 is largely borrowed directly from the EU regulation. We envisage that the joint fisheries statement that flows from that—it is a legal requirement and details of it are set out in schedule 1 to the Bill—will define how we will deliver those sustainability objectives. So the basis of clause 1 is borrowed from the existing EU requirements on sustainability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) raised the issue of enforcement capacity. We are doing work at the moment with Border Force, some of whose staff have been retrained to do fisheries duties. We also have additional vessels from the Royal Navy that are being tested at the moment, and we are in discussion with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency about aerial surveillance. So we are planning on having a significant increase in our enforcement capacity. My hon. Friend also mentioned the danger of the science being out of date. It is always a challenge with the science, but we do put observers on fisheries vessels, and our scientific models attempt to predict the future by looking at particular trends.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned the clause in the Bill that covers the selling of quota rights and said that the tendering and auction processes should be devolved. They are devolved, and the clause is absolutely explicit that it applies only to England. The licensing of foreign vessels is devolved, but we have said that, with the consent of the Scottish Government and others, the Marine Management Organisation might issue a single licence for the whole UK. Clearly, agreements that are made internationally would be a matter for the UK Government. The hon. Lady also suggested that Norway, being outside the European Union, was a victim of fax democracy and had no control over its fisheries. Nothing could be further from the truth. Norway is a serious player and an independent coastal state that controls access to its waters. It conducts its own negotiations on coastal states matters, unlike us; we are currently represented by the European Union.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) gave a passionate speech and raised the importance of allowing selective gear types. This is why we have a power in the Bill to enable us to change technical specifications expeditiously. He has long been an advocate of an effort-based approach. As I have said many times, there are some advantages to an effort-based regime, particularly with mixed fisheries and with the inshore fleet, but there are downsides, too. Generally speaking, a quota system makes the most sense for the pelagic fleet, while an effort-based regime could make more sense for a small inshore fleet. We have set out a proposal in our White Paper for further pilot schemes in this area, particularly for the inshore fleet, but it is not an area that we should rush. My right hon. Friend also asked for reassurance on the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, and I can confirm that UNCLOS will be the new legal baseline once we leave the European Union.

The hon. Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and others raised the issue of tariff-free access for our trade, and of course we are going to be seeking that free trade agreement as part of our future economic partnership, but I would point out that we have a trade surplus in fisheries. We export about £1.3 billion but import £1.1 billion. Largely, the fish species that we export, particularly shellfish, tend to have lower tariffs, while the processed products, which we export far less of, are the ones that tend to have the higher tariffs. I have to say that the message from the processors we have spoken to is, “Don't sell out the catching sector on our account.” I would really welcome such spirit and courage from other sectors of the economy.

My hon. Friends the Members for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for St Ives (Derek Thomas) mentioned the unfairness of existing relative stability shares as the allocation key, and we agree. We set out clearly in the White Paper our view that we should move to zonal...
attachment—that is, where the fish reside—as a fairer and more scientific basis for allocation. We are clear that that is the approach we will take.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) and the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) raised the issue of bluefin tuna. This is a complex issue and it is not specifically covered by the common fisheries policy—it is covered by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, which is a regional fisheries management organisation—but this is certainly something that we can consider.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has more fishing in his constituency than any other Member in this House. He correctly identified the importance of maintaining access for leverage in negotiations. He also mentioned the issue of lobster and brown crab, which would be covered by the western waters regime but would largely be a matter for the Scottish Government.

In conclusion, the Bill is essential, whether we have a deal or no deal. It gives us the legal powers to control access, set quota and manage fisheries sustainability, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

FISHERIES BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Fisheries Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Wednesday 19 December.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

FISHERIES 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 Fisheries Bill, it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees, or other charges, under or by virtue of:

(a) the Act;
(b) the Fisheries Act 1981, or
(c) the promotion or development of recreational fishing;
(2) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State in giving, or in connection with giving, financial assistance to any person for purposes relating to—
(a) the improvement of the marine and aquatic environment;
(b) commercial aquaculture or commercial fish activities; or
(c) the promotion or development of recreational fishing;
(3) any other expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or the Marine Management Organisation.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

FISHERIES BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)).

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Fisheries Bill, it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees, or other charges, under or by virtue of:

(a) the Act;
(b) the Fisheries Act 1981, or
(c) the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 and 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

INVESTIGATORY POWERS

That the draft Investigatory Powers Tribunal Rules 2018, which were laid before this House on 11 October, be approved.

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Order, 23 October, and Standing Order No. 118(6)).

ELECTIONAL COMMISSION

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Lord Gilbert of Panteg and Joan Walley as Electoral Commissioners with effect from 1 November 2018 for the period ending on 31 October 2022; and Alastair Ross for the period ending on 31 October 2020.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

That the draft Infrastructure Planning (Water Resources) (England) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 18 October, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

FAMILY LAW

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

That the draft Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 12 September, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 28 November (Standing Order No. 41A).
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con):
On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your
guidance on the rules about hon. Members using another
hon. Member’s place of birth as a line of attack in this
Chamber. Earlier today, I intervened in the debate on
the Fisheries Bill. When I sat down, the hon. Member
for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said from a sedentary
position that I should go back and be an MP for
Swindon. Now, I am all for robust debate, and I am
proud of where I was born, but I understood that the
reason we refer to each other by the names of our
constituencies is that we are here to represent our
constituents, not ourselves, and that therefore where we
were born does not matter. I first fought for my seat in
2015 and have represented it since 2017, and I have
fought for my constituents every single day. I ask for
clarification, for all Members of the House, that whether
they were born in Scotland and now represent a seat in
England, or whether they were born in Northern Ireland
or Australia and now represent a seat in Scotland, it
does not matter, because what counts is where we want
to be and what we do in this House—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. To be
quite honest, that is not a point of order for me. What I
will say, however, is that you have quite rightly clarified
that if Members were allowed to represent only the
constituency in which they were born, that would not be
possible. Your opinion has been expressed and I think
that we will leave it there.

PETITIONS

The Asylum of Nelly Gelves

7.2 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The petition is
about the asylum of Nelly Gelves and is from the
people of North East Lincolnshire, including Great
Grimsby.

The petition states:
The petition of residents of North East Lincolnshire,
Declares that the situation in Venezuela is desperate and
inhumane; further that it would be wrong for an asylum seeker of
73 years old to be returned to political and religious repression in
a country where she has practically no access to money, food and
basic medicines.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges the Government to support the Asylum and Humanitarian
Protection of Nelly Gelves in the UK to allow her to continue to
live with her family.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Ryarsh Quarry, Kent

7.3 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I rise
to present a petition on behalf of 2,734 residents in and
around the village of Ryarsh, who are united against the
allocation of a site on Roughetts Road for quarrying—there
were a further 881 signatures online. For a village the
size of Ryarsh, with only a few hundred residents, this
shows how the whole community and many more have
come together as one on the issue. Members of the
community are in the Public Gallery, and I am sure that
everyone in the House welcomes them. I am grateful to
the Ryarsh protection group and to Ryarsh Parish Council
for the months they have spent getting so many signatures.
No doubt all those who signed will be pleased that Kent
County Council’s draft minerals and waste local plan
does not include the site.

The petition states:
The petition of Residents of Tonbridge and Malling,
Declares that land in Ryarsh, west of Roughetts Road is an
unsuitable location for a quarry and Kent County Council should
not allocate site M8 for sand extraction in their Minerals and
Waste Local Plan.
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons
urges Kent County Council to reconsider the allocation of a site
for quarrying in Ryarsh, West Malling.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
**Tourism Industry: VAT Reduction**

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

7.4 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am delighted to have obtained this Adjournment debate, albeit slightly postponed. I am grateful to the hon. Members who have remained in their place this evening to take part and to demonstrate that the question of a reduced rate of value added tax for the tourism sector is one that commands cross-party interest and support.

Tourism is the fourth largest sector of the UK economy today and, unlike most sectors, it has a reach across our economy and geography that is hard to equal. Certainly, it is a massively important, and increasingly important, industry in my constituency in the northern isles.

We have previously heard talk of voodoo economics, and tourism is a sector that allows us to apply a little judo economics—that is to say we can use the force of those things that would normally work against us to our favour. In Orkney and Shetland, we have a number of disadvantages due to our geography and the size and sparsity of our population, which are all things that, when it comes to tourism, make us an attractive destination. They are the things that make people want to come to see us in the northern isles. For us, tourism is an enormously important industry, and it is one that has grown massively in recent years.

Tourism also complements many indigenous traditional local industries. For years we have told our fishermen, our farmers and our crofters that they have to diversify or die, and they have taken that message to heart. This does not quite come within what I have to declare as an interest, but my parents’ family farm on Islay, off the west coast, is now in the region of 800 or 900 acres, and it not only supports cattle and sheep, as it has always done. Now, between my sister and my parents, the farm supports four individual self-catering units, which is a good example of how a traditional farming unit has been diversified to take significant income from tourism.

Obviously, tourism fits well with the profile of many communities such as ours, because it allows seasonal and part-time employment, which are both important in communities such as ours, because it allows seasonal and part-time employment, which are both important in communities where people perhaps do not have just one job working 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. People are looking for a range of different income sources—as evidenced by the recent growth in the number of people working as tour guides in both Orkney and Shetland—and such employment offers that sort of opportunity.

In establishing the importance of tourism as an industry, in communities like mine right the way through to where I stand in one of the best-known tourism destinations in the country, the question arises of how we can best seek to allow the industry to grow itself.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this Adjournment debate. He has mentioned the attractiveness of his constituency to tourists. A VAT reduction would definitely benefit tourism in Northern Ireland. In 2017, some 2.6 million out-of-state visitors and more than 2 million Northern Ireland residents took an overnight trip in Northern Ireland, and during 2017 visitors from all markets combined to spend £926 million in Northern Ireland, up £76 million on the previous year. Does he agree that lowering VAT can only encourage more people to make the trip to Northern Ireland or to his constituency, luring people away from the Republic of Ireland by providing unrivalled beauty and attractions with unrivalled pricing? Indeed, the same could be said of the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman makes the point well. I am aware that Northern Ireland has a particular issue as it shares a land border, a fact that is fairly well discussed at the moment, with the Republic of Ireland. The Republic is one of those countries that in 2011—I will doubtless be corrected if I am wrong—cut their rate of VAT on tourism services to 9%. There is a particular sensitivity about the cross-border issues there, which may assist the hon. Gentleman in making the case, because there is a good working example on his own doorstep of the opportunities that are presented.

I know it is counter-intuitive in the Treasury to suggest that cutting taxes will bring an increased return in revenue, but there is good objective evidence to support that very proposition. I was a member of the Cabinet in 2015 when the Budget cut the rate of spirits duty by 2%. We did that expecting it would result in a reduced return of about £600 million, but we felt it was an important thing to do. In fact, the revenue return as a whole was significantly increased. So having taken the expected hit, we got a better return at the end of the day. This is the same thinking that underpins the Government’s reductions in corporation tax in recent years.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The Somerset Tourism Association and Visit Somerset have made representations to me on this matter and they very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman that a reduction in VAT on overnight accommodation and visitor attractions leaves more money in the pockets of visitors to spend on other things during their stay. So the money is not lost to the system; it grows the visitor economy even further.

Mr Carmichael: The hon. Gentleman leads me nicely to my next point. I was going to try to explain the way in which this reduced level of VAT feeds into other parts of the economy and the effects it can have. It is argued, with some force, that the reduction in VAT can lead to higher employment levels and better wages, which in turn leads to increased income tax receipts. The increased profitability of businesses, some of which are currently marginal and probably not even paying much tax at all, provides the opportunity for greater returns in corporation tax. Eventually, this feeds through to higher expenditure in other sectors—this is the so-called “tourism multiplier”, which goes back to the hon. Gentleman’s point. It is estimated that for an additional 1p spent in tourism we will see another 70p generated in spend in other sectors.

The European Union VAT laws currently require a broad uniformity of VAT and sales taxes across the whole EU, but there is a specific derogation for certain supplies. The list of these derogations is set out in annex III to the principal VAT directive 2006/112/EC. The three items of particular relevance to the tourism sector are items (7), (12) and (12a). For the benefit of the House, let me read those into the record. Item (7) specifies:
representative of a slightly smaller gateway—a significant moment, were it ever to expect the Minister to stand up and say, “All right, on academic and sectoral opinion says that it would offer the sector. It seems to me that a significant body of both robust scrutiny by the Treasury, but it should be taken not as the subject of argument or debate but as the analysis found that there would be gains of £5.3 billion especially on cruise ships in the summer months—I can number of people come in through Kirkwall and Lerwick, and it would also be a boost to gateways to the UK such reducing VAT on tourism would boost the economy, Treasury will listen sympathetically. He is right that is making a powerful argument and I hope that the events and facilities”.

Mr Carmichael: That is a good point. In fact, as the representative of a slightly smaller gateway—a significant number of people come in through Kirkwall and Lerwick, especially on cruise ships in the summer months—I can see the opportunities to be had. As I was saying, the Cut Tourism VAT campaign analysis found that there would be gains of £5.3 billion over 10 years. I hope that that would be subject to pretty robust scrutiny by the Treasury, but it should be taken not as the subject of argument or debate but as the starting point for a discussion between the Treasury and the sector. It seems to me that a significant body of both academic and sectoral opinion says that it would offer opportunities for our businesses to grow and for the Treasury to get more money as a consequence. I do not expect the Minister to stand up and say, “All right, on you go”—I suspect that that moment, were it ever to come, passed with the Budget—but there is still a wide range of opinion on this issue in the House and there is a wide range of support for it throughout the country. It would assist us all, Treasury included, if the Minister was prepared to open the lines of communication and engage with those of us who are making the case.

7.19 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this debate and on his perseverance in ensuring that we have this opportunity to debate these important matters. He quite rightly raised the importance of tourism, of which the Government are extremely aware: 1.6 million people are employed in the sector. He made important points about the sheer reach across the economy of the tourist sector, right down to the very point that he raised in his own constituency of examples of farms where additional income is being raised through participating in tourist-related activity. The sector provides £66 billion to the UK economy and 3.8% of gross value added. He is also right that, at the moment, tourism is booming not just in his constituency, but across the United Kingdom. Last year, 2017, was a record year, with 39.2 million visitors to the UK, which was 4.3% up on 2016. Not only are more tourists coming, but they are spending more as well, with an even larger increase in the amount that they are spending.

It is important to put on record the admiration that we as a Government have for the sector, and the gratitude that we have for all those who work so hard in what is quite a tough industry—it is one of those sectors that has rather a nice, soft and fun feel to it, but we all appreciate that a lot of hard work goes on behind that. The Government not only recognise the importance of tourism, but are also there to support tourism. I cite three broad areas in which we do that. The first is to get the broader economic factors correct. As the House will know, we have had eight years of economic growth and the Office for Budget Responsibility is now projecting a further five years of growth. We have high levels of employment, low levels of unemployment and we are seeing inflation coming down towards its target as well. That is an important broader macroeconomic context in which we hold this debate and discuss tourism.

The second area is business in general. We have reduced tax on companies across the board from 28% in 2010 down to 17% in the coming couple of years.

James Heappey: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that one of the taxes that could really catalyse growth in our visitor economy, not just for tourism, but for business travel as well, is further reductions in air passenger duty, beyond the very welcome announcement in the Budget, because nothing, surely, can catalyse growth in our visitor economy more than further reductions in APD?

Mel Stride: APD is certainly one of those taxes that we, along with all others, constantly keep under review. My hon. Friend will have noticed the freezing in short-haul APD that occurred at the time of this Budget, but he is right that we seek to keep that and other taxes as low as we can.

We supported our high streets in our recent Budget by reducing business rates by some 30% for smaller retailers, which will be of great benefit to some of the
coastal towns in particular that the right hon. Gentleman will be thinking of, I know, when he speaks about the importance of tourism to the economy.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving way. On the subject of coastal towns, as he and the whole House will be aware, the best places to visit as a tourist are some of the wonderful coastal towns of North Devon. The tourism industry in my constituency has lobbied hard for exactly the position that the right hon. Gentleman has proposed. It is something for which I have a great deal of sympathy, but I wonder whether, as well as Her Majesty’s Treasury entering into those sorts of thoughts, we could look across the Government at other ways that the tourism industry can be supported. The point that is often made to me is that, for a relatively modest spend on promotion of the UK and its regions as a tourist destination, we can have greater benefits for the local economies.

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I recognise the sterling work that he does in promoting tourism in his own constituency. He is a constituency neighbour of mine and I am well aware of the good work that he does. He is right: we must do a lot of important things in terms of specifically supporting tourism.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response so far. It is always a pleasure to intervene on him. Will he acknowledge that one of the great disadvantages that we have in Northern Ireland is the border, to which the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) referred? There is an inflow of tourists going into the Republic of Ireland who take advantage of the 9% VAT rate as against what we have in Northern Ireland. It is about making sure that those tourists and visitors go across the border. Does he see the disadvantage of having the two different VAT rates, and does he also see the advantage of having a reconciled VAT rate, which would mean that we in Northern Ireland could then take bigger advantage of the US visitors who go to the Republic of Ireland?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of VAT specifically in Northern Ireland. As he will be aware, we undertook a call for evidence, which we announced at the Budget before last. We have now reported on that and will continue to look at the issue of VAT, although we are currently constrained by virtue of our membership of the European Union, as I will argue later. Northern Ireland actually has some advantages over the Republic of Ireland when it comes to VAT. For example, we have the highest VAT threshold for businesses that have to charge VAT in the European Union and the OECD, including the Irish Republic.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland mentioned the specific support we provide for tourism. We provide some £60 million per year for our GREAT Britain campaign, £20 million per year of which goes to VisitBritain. Our tourism action plan looks at regulation, transport, skills and all the other things that underpin tourist activity as well as money and taxation. Some £40 million goes to the Discover England fund for promoting tourism outside London.

At the heart of the right hon. Gentleman’s ask is clearly a reduction in VAT, particularly with regard to food and beverages, attractions and accommodation—the areas that he cited when he mentioned the VAT directive and the derogations in items (7), (12) and (12a). The Government recognise the strength of feeling on this matter. We have met campaigners over many years, and I have engaged extensively with Members right across the House. We will keep VAT and VAT on tourism under review, but unfortunately there are some issues from which we cannot hide away. One of those issues is the fact that, if we are to make a change, under the current arrangements with the European Union that change would have to be UK-wide. It would therefore come with quite a hefty price tag.

The Treasury estimates that, in the first year at least—although one recognises there are dynamic effects of reducing taxes, increasing activity and therefore perhaps getting more tax revenue further down the line—we would be looking at a cost of about £10 billion for reducing VAT from 20% down to 5% in the categories that I mentioned. That would be about £7 billion on food and beverages, £2 billion on accommodation and £1 billion on attractions. Some of that loss, or some of the relief that we would be providing, would be dead weight in the sense that it would not necessarily solely apply to supporting tourism.

Mr Carmichael: There is one important factor of which we should not lose sight, which is that our tourism sector is enormously competitive. Therefore, there would be every incentive for the operators in the industry to pass on the money that would be available to them by having a reduced rate of VAT. As a consequence, we would see that recycling effect accelerated in a way that we probably would not see in any other industry.

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. As somebody who philosophically believes in lower taxes, I think that is a very strong argument. However, unfortunately there is the cost argument. To use the same kind of principles to the right hon. Gentleman’s argument on recycling, clearly if we were bringing in less by way of taxation as a consequence of the reduction, there would be less to spend on other things that arguably might help tourism, including improved infrastructure and maybe even tax reliefs in other areas, such as the progress that we have made in reducing small retailers’ business rates.

We have one of the highest VAT thresholds of any country in both the European Union and the OECD, which is an advantage to us and our tourist sector.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): We see the reduction in VAT as one of the cards in the deck that can help to grow our economy, and it is vitally important, from a tourism perspective, that we look at that. However, one of the other tools in the box is air passenger duty. We are competing against Dublin because the Republic of Ireland has zero APD. That is not just affecting Northern Ireland—it affects airports throughout the UK because, to save on APD, people are travelling from the UK to Dublin to go on to America. That has an impact not just on Northern Ireland but on airports in the UK.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. In fact, I have been to Northern Ireland and met representatives of Belfast airport and others, and I have met them here in the UK—in London—as well. As he
will know, we had a call for evidence on APD, which was launched at the Budget before last, and we have reported back on that. We have now set up a technical working group to see what kinds of opportunities there may be to devolve APD to Northern Ireland, although at the moment there is the critical issue of the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive. In the longer term, we would certainly be committed to seeing the issue devolved, and then of course it would be for the Northern Ireland Executive, once reconstituted and up and running, to take the appropriate decisions around that.

Returning to VAT, we do of course have reduced rates in the United Kingdom in areas like museums and transport such as buses and trains, which is not universally the case across our competitor nations. It is also possible, through the retail export scheme, for certain visitors to the UK to reclaim VAT from certain retailers. That is another important VAT relief.

In essence, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is right that I was not going to spring up to the Dispatch Box and announce a huge tax cut across the tourism sector, much as I would love to have done. Perhaps in this crazy world in which we are living, I should have done, but there we are—I did not. I restrained myself and was responsible, for once. However, I absolutely reassure him that everything that he has said on this matter this evening, and indeed has said in the past and will say in future, has been and will be very carefully noted. We will continue to look at all taxes, and certainly VAT. I look forward to further engagement with him in the coming weeks and months, and thank him very much indeed for bringing this important debate to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

7.32 pm
House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Jersey) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 238.

Division No. 264

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Ann
Afriyie, Stephen
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Bercow, Sir Lindsay
Berry, Mr John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bertie, Alex
Berry, Jo
Berrington, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breeret, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cairns, rh Alun
Cairns, rh Alun
Cain, Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carling, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleerely, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therese
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankoly, Mr Jonathan
Dockery, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyles, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Eplin, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr David
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Graying, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harry, 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
Heron, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Holllinrake, Kevin
Hollon, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Garet
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Mussion, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rosary
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Deferred Divisions
21 NOVEMBER 2018

Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Cruddas, Jon
Creasy, Stella
Creagh, Mary
Crawley, Angela
Coyne, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Crawley, Angela
Coyle, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Mr Jim

Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheelers, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Laverty, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewin, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeill, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewlias, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thorning, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Phillipa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williams, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
Deferred Divisions

21 NOVEMBER 2018

Deferred Divisions

CROUCH, Tracey

CRABB, Stephen

COURTS, Robert

COSTA, Alberto

COLLINS, Damian

Coffey, Dr Thérèse

COLLINS, Damian

COSTA, Alberto

COURTS, Robert

COX, rh Mr Geoffrey

CRABB, rh Stephen

CROUCH, Tracey

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

Heron, Lady

Hinds, rh Damian

Hoare, Simon

Hollingbery, George

Hollinrake, Kevin

Holloway, Adam

Hower, John

Huddleston, Nigel

Hughes, Eddie

Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy

Jack, Mr Alister

James, Margot

Javid, rh Sajid

Jayawardena, Mr Ranil

Jenkin, Sir Bernard

Jenyns, Andrea

Jenrick, Robert

Johnson, rh Boris

Johnson, rh Sir Caroline

Johnson, rh Philip

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

Leadsom, rh Andrea

Lee, Dr Phillip

Lefroy, Jeremy

Letwin, rh Sir Oliver

Lewer, Andrew

Lewis, rh Brandon

Lewis, rh Dr Julian

Liddle, rh Sir David

Little Pengelly, Emma

Lopez, Julia

Lopresti, Jack

Lord, Mr Jonathan

Loughton, Tim

Maclean, Rachel

Main, Mrs Anne

Mak, Alan

Malthouse, Kit

Mann, Scott

Masterton, Paul

May, rh Mrs Theresa

Maynard, Paul

McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick

McVey, rh Ms Esther

Mercer, Johnny

Merriman, Huw Matt

Miller, rh Mrs Maria

Milling, Amanda

Milton, rh Anne

Moore, Damien

Mordaunt, rh Penny

Morgan, rh Nicky

Morris, Anne Marie

Morris, David

Morris, James

Morton, Wendy

Mundell, rh David

Murray, Mrs Sheryll

Murrison, Dr Andrew

Neill, Robert

Newton, Sarah

Nokes, rh Caroline

Norman, Jesse

O'Brien, Neil

Offord, Dr Matthew

Opperman, Guy

Paisley, Ian

Parish, Neil

Patel, rh Priti

Paterson, rh Mr Owen

Pawsey, Mark

Penning, rh Sir Mike

Penrose, John

Perry, rh Andrew

Perry, rh Claire

Philp, Chris

Pincher, Christopher

Poulter, Dr Dan

Pow, Rebecca

Prentis, Victoria

Prisk, Mr Mark

Pritchard, Mark

Purseglove, Tom

Quin, Jeremy

Quince, Will

Raab, rh Dominic

Redwood, rh John

Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob

Roberton, rh Laurence

Robinson, Mary

Rosindell, Andrew

Ross, Douglas

Rowley, Lee

Rudd, rh Amber

Rutley, David

Sandbach, Antoinette

Seely, rh Mr Bob

Selous, Andrew

Shannon, Jim

Shapps, rh Grant

Sharma, Alok

Simpson, rh Mr Keith

Skidmore, Chris

Smith, Chloe

Smith, Henry

Smith, rh Julian

Smith, Royston

Soames, rh Sir Nicholas

Soubry, rh Anna

Spelman, rh Dame Caroline

Spencer, Mark

Stephenson, Andrew

Stevenson, John

Stewart, Bob

Stewart, Ian

Stewart, Rory

Streeter, Mr Gary

Stride, rh Mel

Stuart, Graham

Sturdy, Julian

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 238.

Division No. 265]
NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzii, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bardell, Hannah
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Brock
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowen, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cummins, Judith

Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warmان, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
day, Martyn
de Cordova, Marsha
de Piero, Gloria
debonair, Thangam
dent Coad, Emma
dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Dockey-Hughes, Martin
dodds, Anneliese
doughby, Stephen
dowd, Peter
drew, Dr David
dromey, Jack
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gillon, 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
Hanson, rh David

Hardy, Emma
Haris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holmern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Levis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex

O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewlias, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
Capital Gains Tax

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Guernsey) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 4 September, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 238.

Division No. 266]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Ali, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Hartnett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Mr Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bolsover, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, Sir Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, r/h Alistair
Cairns, r/h Alun
Cairns, r/h Alun
Cairns, r/h Alun
Cairns, r/h Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cass, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chiusho, Reinhan
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, r/h Greg
Clarke, r/h Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clewer, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, r/h Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, r/h Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, r/h Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, r/h Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evanneth, r/h Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, r/h Sir Michael
Field, r/h Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, r/h Dr Liam
Francois, r/h Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garner, Mark
Gauke, r/h Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, r/h Nick
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, r/h Mr Robert
Gove, r/h Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, r/h Chris
Green, Chris
Green, r/h Damian
Grieve, r/h Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, r/h Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, r/h Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, r/h Matt
Hands, r/h Greg
Harper, r/h Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, r/h Mr John
Heald, r/h Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, r/h Nick
Hernon, Lady
Hinds, r/h Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, r/h Mr Jeremy
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, r/h Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, r/h Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, r/h Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Dan
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, r/h Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, r/h Mark
Leadsom, r/h Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, r/h Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, r/h Brandon
Lewis, r/h Dr Julian
Lidingon, r/h Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Madeean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, r/h Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, r/h Sir Patrick
McVey, r/h Ms Esther
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Miller, r/h Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, r/h Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, r/h Penny
Morgan, r/h Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, r/h David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, r/h Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oxford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, r/h Priti
Paterson, r/h Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, r/h Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, r/h Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, r/h Dominic
Redwood, r/h John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, r/h Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, r/h Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, r/h Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, r/h Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, r/h Sir Nicholas
Soubry, r/h Anna
Spelman, r/h Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streete, Mr Gary
Stride, r/h Sel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Question accordingly agreed to.

Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurist, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shasleish
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Willastone, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Hardy, Emma
Harries, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holman, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hope, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeill, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Siobhain
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morrison, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex

O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewlis, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thorberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel
IMMIGRATION

That the draft Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 11 October, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 232.

Division No. 267]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Sir Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brecon, Jack
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Caims, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishilt, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Nigel
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dornies, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francis, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
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
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, 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
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Jack, rh Mr Alistair
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kingsley, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadson, rh Andrew
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, rh Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Merriman, Hugo
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priit
Paterno, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Powl, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Rhoyston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, Sir Desmond
Swire, Sir Hugo
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Rose
Throup, Maggie
Tohuret, Kelly
Tomlinson, Adam
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, Mr. Edward

Vara, Mr. Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr. Charles
Walker, Mr. Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs. Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hermes, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Keerey, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kyle, Peter
Laid, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan

Onn, Melanie
Owusu, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Shearer, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timmis, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twist, Liz
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitefield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishtart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
The Secretary of State was asked—

Train Services in the North

1. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the (a) reliability and (b) number of train services in the north.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We are now running significantly more services on Northern than we were prior to May, but I am aware that there are continuing performance issues, particularly this month. In September, with Transport for the North, which jointly manages this franchise with my Department, I appointed leading industry figure Richard George to co-ordinate the efforts of the train operators and Network Rail to improve the reliability of services in the north. Richard is also working with industry and TfN to examine the significant increase in services which the operators committed to in December 2019. It is essential that these changes are realistic and deliverable, given the need for rail operators to provide a reliable service to passengers.

Mary Creagh: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but he is showing a bit of a tin ear to the lived experience of my constituents. One of them took six hours to travel the 75 miles between Wakefield and Scarborough, which, with a good wind, I could have achieved on a bicycle in the same amount of time. Why has capital investment in the north fallen—as the Institute for Public Policy Research has shown—when the need for investment in our services has never been higher?

Chris Grayling: I would make two points. First, the IPPR keeps using misleading comparators. The Infrastructure and Projects Authority figures, which are the official figures prepared for the Government, have already shown that, per capita, the north is currently achieving more expenditure per head of population than the south. Of course, in the north—the hon. Lady’s area—the flagship programme for the next five years on rail, the trans-Pennine upgrade, is the most substantial anywhere in the country. Her constituency is also benefiting from increased services on the route to Knottingley.

I accept that there have been some real issues with the TransPennine Express on the route to Scarborough. Those are things that need to be addressed. There are performance issues that are not good enough. It is not a question of having a tin ear. We are actively working to try to improve things on a network that is delivering more services, rather than fewer, and in which substantial investment is happening. One of the frustrations is that the timetable problems in the north this year were triggered by an investment programme that was delayed.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that we get a full picture of this? Will he ensure that we see what new trains were being made available in the north between 1997 and 2010, and between 2010 and 2020 and let us say 2020, so that we can see the investment that is going on by the Government in the north?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend makes an important point and I pay tribute to him for ensuring the investment programme that is currently taking place. The reality is that, in that decade, there were no new trains in the north and no investment: the Labour party let a standstill franchise on the northern rail network. It is this Government who are renewing every single train in the north of England and it is long overdue.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Secretary of State goes back to the timetable changes, but currently one in four Northern trains are delayed or cancelled and nearly one in three TransPennine trains are delayed or cancelled. Is not it time that he took control and took these franchises back, so that we can have a proper rail service in the north of England?

Chris Grayling: That is precisely why I say that I am not satisfied with the current performance issues. That is why we have appointed Richard George to understand why the service is not performing adequately. It is of course hampered by the fact that some of the performance issues recently have been caused by the elderly Pacer trains, which are being phased out, starting in the coming weeks. However, we need to do everything we can and we will continue to do everything we can, in partnership with Transport for the North, to identify the ways of getting performance up. It is not simply a question of changing ownership of the franchise or control of the franchise. There is not a magic team down the corridor waiting to step in and make this work better. We have got to make it work better.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): As we have heard, TransPennine passengers to and from Scarborough have had to endure a summer of delays. Indeed, because of drivers’ hours, many trains have been terminated at York, leaving passengers waiting an hour for the following service, if it is not also delayed. Although there has been some improvement, when are we likely to see a return to normality?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely sympathise with people in Scarborough. Of course, we are introducing additional services to Scarborough in the coming months, so that there will be a Northern service there as well. The work that Richard George is doing to look at why these performance issues are happening is similar to the work we did with Chris Gibb on Southern, which has led to an improvement in performance on that network, and I am absolutely clear that we have to deal with the issues that he highlights.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Let us get to the real north, which is Scotland. Overall, the Abellio ScotRail franchise is the best performing large franchisee, but 50% of delays and cancellations are...
attributable to Network Rail. The Secretary of State is being obstinate with us, but will he not consider devolution of Network Rail to allow the Scottish Government to take full responsibility? It would generate savings, which would also help to offset the £400 million shortfall from his Government.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes that argument regularly, but the devolution of Network Rail was not recommended in the report produced on devolution in Scotland. Given the SNP’s less-than-good record in running other services in Scotland, it escapes me why he thinks that devolving Network Rail would make a difference to train services in Scotland.

Alan Brown: As usual, the Secretary of State shows his full knowledge of Scotland. He will be aware that the rail industry review panel includes Tom Harris, a former rail Minister, who has written a report that calls for the devolution of Network Rail to Scotland. I wrote a letter to the Secretary of State on 15 October but he has not responded. Will he now confirm that he has not restricted the terms of reference for the rail industry review panel, and that if they recommend devolution of Network Rail to Scotland, he will act on that?

Chris Grayling: I have not set any limits on that approach. I have asked the panel to consider the question of devolution, as well as how we can improve the workings of the railways. It is no secret that in my view we need a more joined-up railway to meet the challenges of a system that is under intense pressure. The Government are investing record amounts in infrastructure upgrades, including spending money in Scotland, and that is in addition to using the Barnett formula, which is the norm for the allocation of funds to Scotland. We have a railway that is bursting at the seams, and it needs to work better if it is to deal with the pressures on it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Since the announcement of the northern powerhouse agenda, transport spend per person has risen by twice as much in London as it has in the north. New analysis of Treasury figures published this week shows the gap widening, with an increase in spend of £326 per person in the capital, just £146 per person in the north, and the amount even falling in Yorkshire—more than in any other region—resulting in poor reliability and capacity. Why such under-investment?

Chris Grayling: I am the Secretary of State who has planned over the next five years for 50% of the rail enhancement budget that the Government are putting in place to be spent in the north—on upgrading the east coast main line, on the trans-Pennine upgrade and on other schemes that will make a real difference. When Labour Members were in government they did none of that, so you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, if I take no lessons from the Labour party about investment in transport in the north. We are getting on with delivering it.

South Western Railway and National Rail Review

2. Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to implement the recommendations of the independent review of South Western Railway and National Rail.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The South Western Railway performance review was published on 10 September 2018. It was independently chaired by Sir Michael Holdon, and SWR and Network Rail are already working to implement its conclusions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the former rail Minister met representatives from South Western Railway and the Network Rail Wessex route on 24 October to review their progress in implementing the performance review. They are on track to complete delivery of all the recommendations in that review, a number of which are already complete, and all short-term recommendations will be complete by the end of this year.

Mr Jayawardena: May I welcome my hon. Friend’s return to the Front Bench? Although my constituents will welcome the review, they are furious about the terrible disruption across South Western Railway on “mayhem Monday” this week, with seemingly no contingency plans and diabolical communication. Will my hon. Friend ensure that South Western Railway and Network Rail are held to account and made to learn lessons from this week’s mess, especially given the planned Network Rail engineering works this Sunday?

Andrew Jones: That incident was utterly unacceptable—there is no question about that—and I am not surprised that my hon. Friend’s constituents are furious about it. The Secretary of State spoke to Andrew Haines, chief executive of Network Rail, at 7 o’clock on Monday morning, and he made clear his dissatisfaction with the incident and demanded action. Network Rail has started an independent investigation to look at how the work was planned and delivered, and how the resulting disruption was managed. It has already made management changes, and new leadership on the Wessex route will start next week. South Western Railway also has lessons to learn, and it must review its communications with its customers. That part is critical and it failed on Monday. It must do far better.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Welcome back, but—I have had some pretty miserable experiences on that train line, but they are as nothing compared with how ghastly it must be to be rail Minister. Does my hon. Friend think that that might have contributed to his predecessor’s resignation?

Andrew Jones: That question is flawed, Mr Speaker. There is nothing ghastly at all about being the rail Minister, and I cannot understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from. I think the reasons for my predecessor’s departure are already documented elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s portfolio grows by the day. He previously served the House and the nation with distinction as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for buses, so from bus to rail really is an impressive CV, it has to be said. [Laughter.] Well, it is.

Train Timetable Changes

3. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What lessons his Department has learnt from recent train timetable changes.

[907765]
**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** We recognise the appalling disruption that some passengers experienced following the May timetable introduction. We have to be very clear that this cannot be repeated. The final Glaister report, providing recommendations on future changes that can be made to prevent disruption at timetable changes, will be published shortly. We are also working closely with the rail industry to provide a seriously enhanced level of assurance on planned timetable changes in December 2018 and May 2019.

**Tom Brake:** Does the Secretary of State agree that, contrary to the impression that he gave in this letter, the Department for Transport did have a significant role in the timetabling fiasco? In fact, according to the Office of Rail and Road interim report, the DFT’s decision to phase in the introduction of Thameslink stretched resources badly. Does he agree that one of the most damning comments in that report is that the industry placed engineering requirements ahead of serving passengers? How will he ensure that in future the DFT accepts full responsibility for its failures and the industry prioritises passengers over rails and rolling stock?

**Chris Grayling:** The latter point is extremely important. It is not good enough to have Network Rail too focused on engineering and not focused enough on passengers. It is one of the problems in the rail industry and why we have already started to work towards a more joined-up railway through an alliance structure. As I said with the announcement of the rail review, that is an essential railway through an alliance structure. As I said with the timetabling fiasco, we are seeing very good services, on lines from London to Stafford, but the number of passengers over rails and rolling stock.

**Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that it is not just timetable changes that are important, although they have been improved on lines from London to Stafford, but the number of coaches on the trains? On the London Northwestern railway—the LNWR—we are seeing very good services, but the trains are too short, with four carriages, instead of eight. Will he have a look at that?

**Chris Grayling:** I will certainly have a look and the rail Minister will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about that. We are supporting a programme of substantial investment in new rolling stock all around the country, which will benefit passengers. New coaches will be arriving on the LNWR franchise, but we could certainly have a discussion about where they are serving.

**Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab):** In the last timetable changes, on the midland main line, Stagecoach was forced to lengthen the journey times of peak time trains from Sheffield to London to accommodate more Thameslink commuter trains. Is it true that the Department for Transport has told Stagecoach it cannot revisit that in the next timetable changes because of the shambles last time and the nervousness that has created in the Department?

**Chris Grayling:** We would dispute that we have done anything to disadvantage Sheffield to help Govia Thameslink Railway. We are of course doing a massive upgrade programme on the midland main line. I pay tribute to all those involved in the recent Derby station remodelling. Many projects have gone badly wrong; that did not. It was handled very well. Further improvements are happening up and down that line, as part of the biggest modernisation programme on that route since Victorian times. That work will continue. We will do everything to make sure, if we can, that the timetable remains as intact as possible as those changes happen.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** I do not wish to disappoint the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), but he does have Question 9, which will be reached and is grouped, so it is mildly inconvenient to call him any earlier than that. We are keeping him waiting, but it will be worth waiting for, I feel sure.

**Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con):** Is there any advice that the Secretary of State can give to the Welsh Transport Minister? Changes to the franchise and timetable changes have resulted this week in the chief operating officer coming out with a statement saying that too many trains have been cancelled, delayed or have arrived late, with fewer carriages than normal—and that is under a Labour Government.

**Chris Grayling:** My hon. Friend puts his finger on the nub of the issue. The Labour party says, “If we just wave our magic wand, it will all be fine.” The reality is that we have a deeply congested railway facing big operational challenges. We are investing substantial amounts in it but—he points out the situation in Wales—there are no magic solutions anywhere in the country, under any Government.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** The Secretary of State can duck and dive but the fact is that there is a lack of strategic leadership in his Department. What we found in Huddersfield is that, overnight, they cancelled the link between Huddersfield and Wakefield Westgate, so people cannot get a main line train unless they go to Leeds—and nobody in Huddersfield would want to go to Leeds at any time. The fact of the matter is that we want good strategy and policies that stop people living in chaos and not being able to get to work or go on holiday.

**Chris Grayling:** What the hon. Gentleman needs are policies that invest money in rail in the north to deliver—as I know is happening at his station—new trains to replace long out-of-date trains and provide more services for passengers. That is what we are aiming to do and what we are doing.

**Local Roads**

4. **Alan Mak (Havant) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to improve the condition of local roads. [907767]

12. **Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):** What steps the Government are taking to improve the condition of roads in residential areas. [907777]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman):** The Department for Transport is providing over £6.6 billion to local highway authorities in England between 2015 and 2021 to improve the condition of
local roads. That includes a £296 million pothole action fund and the additional £420 million for local highways maintenance announced in Budget 2018.

Alan Mak: Many councils now use technology to enable residents to report road-related problems. Will my hon. Friend encourage the greater use of digital apps and technology tools to make councils more accountable for the road issues in their area?

Jesse Norman: I am well aware of my hon. Friend’s interest in technology and the potential ways in which it can improve productivity. He is absolutely right, and I encourage all councils to use technology better as far as possible for residents to report road-related problems. As he will be aware, they do so in Hampshire, where the county council uses an online reporting tool, but the Department has also done work to support this, not least through assistance to Cycling UK to revamp its pothole reporting website.

Helen Goodman: I hope that the Minister will find £60 million for County Durham. In the meantime, new estates are being built without proper roads. Instead of overlooking this 21st-century squalor, will he talk to his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to require the planning rules to be changed so that roads are built to adoptable standards?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will be surprised to know that there is a housing infrastructure fund that is in part precisely designed to facilitate the relationship between road building and new housing, and of course, that is what it is doing.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is not so much the condition of local roads but the amount of obstructions on them, from double parking to kerbside parking to parking in bus and cycle lanes. Rather than waiting for traffic management orders, which can be quite binary, to come into place, would it not be better for the Department to issue guidance on the definition of “obstruction”, so that more local authorities can deal with it in a flexible way that means that motorists are not being penalised in an unreasonable manner?

Jesse Norman: Gosh, I am going to resist the temptation to bring in the casuists to discuss the question of how obstruction is to be defined, but I direct my hon. Friend, without giving too much of a sneak preview, to the work that we have done—announced today in a written ministerial statement—on the cycling and walking safety report, which includes enforcement against parking in mandatory cycle lanes for precisely the reasons that he indicates.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): This week is Road Safety Week, yet investment on minor roads has fallen by 40% since 2010 and the number of potholes is rapidly increasing, leaving 17% of local roads in England in poor condition, according to the Asphalt Industry Alliance. The Department’s own figures show that there have been 13 deaths and 192 cyclists seriously injured since 2010 on roads that have a defective road surface. In this week of all weeks, how can the Government defend their record on maintaining local roads?

Jesse Norman: I am not sure where to begin with that. If the hon. Gentleman looks carefully at the work of the RAC Foundation, he will discover that, in relative terms, the number of potholes on our roads spiked between the years 2005 and 2010 and has been coming down slowly but steadily, more or less, ever since.

Matt Rodda: Is the Minister in all sincerity denying the evidence of the Asphalt Industry Alliance, which carried out a detailed survey of local authorities, which showed that there is a backlog of a minimum of £9 billion of work on potholes?

Jesse Norman: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman might want to look at a wider range of sources than just the Asphalt Industry Alliance for his information about the use of asphalt in filling potholes, but the issue is a serious one. He will know that I have made clear my interest not merely in an in-year road settlement of £420 million for potholes, which the Government have just passed and which is highly welcome, but in a more strategic approach to local roads funding over the next five years.

Engineering: Girls and People from Ethnic Backgrounds

5. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage more girls and people from ethnic backgrounds to pursue a career in engineering.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My Department launched the Year of Engineering to increase the number and diversity of engineers across the UK and to address the engineering skills gap. I am indebted to my hon. Friend for his interest in technology and the potential ways in which it can improve productivity. He is absolutely right, and I am greatly encouraged by the reaction that I have seen from young people as they come into direct contact with inspiring engineers from all backgrounds. Does my hon. Friend share my commitment to finding a way to carry on the good work of the Year of Engineering, so that we can continue to push the message that engineering is open to everyone, regardless of background, ethnicity and gender?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. We are building on the legacy of this year, working with organisations ranging from Siemens, FIFA and Apple to the Science Museum, and we are committed to building on that work so that even more young people understand and appreciate the success of a career in engineering.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) on the success of the Year of Engineering in promoting engineering as a fantastic career for everyone, but engineering is not just for one year; it is forever. Will the Minister follow Labour’s example and produce a diversity charter for the transport sector, so that the numerous initiatives—which
are all very good in their own way—can be brought together, and we can see concrete progress and, most importantly, measure it?

Ms Ghani: The Year of Engineering has been a collaborative project involving more than 1,400 firms and partners. One of their objectives was to reach out to communities that may not have had experience of engineering. We have had some successes: young people in primary schools are thinking about engineering as a career, as are older students. We will work with our partners and see what more we can do, building on the work that we have done this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I had an opportunity to visit Northern Ireland with the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), and we thank him for coming. Northern Ireland has seen a 5% rise in female engineering students in the past two years. Does the Minister intend to target children in key stage 3, to initiate a passion for engineering in the early stages of secondary school applications?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. We fully appreciate that girls in particular can close their minds to engineering at quite an early stage, at primary school. We want to work with young students throughout their school lives to ensure that they realise that it is a good career, and one that is open to them.

Southeastern

6. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What recent discussions his Department has had with Southeastern on (a) timetabling and (b) performance standards.  

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The franchise agreement between the Department and train operators includes key performance benchmarks. The Department monitors each train operator against those levels, and that includes regular meetings with their senior management team at which performance figures are scrutinised and challenged. A range of enforcement mechanisms are available to the Department in the event of non-compliance.

Matthew Pennycook: Given their experience in recent years, many of my constituents are looking to the next operator of the Southeastern franchise to significantly improve timetabling performance. With that end in mind, will the Minister—who I warmly welcome to his post—confirm that the Department still expects to announce the winning bidder this month and reassure passengers that the start of the new franchise will not be delayed?

Andrew Jones: The level of performance management in that area is 91.2%, which is high across our railways. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with full details of the answer that he has requested.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on taking up his post. My constituents could be forgiven for thinking that new Rail Ministers turn up more frequently than Southeastern trains.

Public performance measures are currently below their 2010 level. They are running below their target and are not due to reach it until 2025. Does that not show that privatisation is not working for my constituents, and it is time that Southeastern was brought under public control and the Mayor of London?

Andrew Jones: I would just highlight to the hon. Gentleman that the railways are carrying significantly more passengers. On his privatisation point, privatisation has turned around our railways: after decades of decline under British Rail, we have seen passenger numbers grow from 750 million to 1.7 billion. We have one of the most intensively used, fastest growing and safest railways in Europe. Privatisation is the answer.

East Coast Main Line Route Study

7. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): What decisions on railway investment he plans to make as a result of the recent east coast main line route study.  

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department is investing up to £780 million to upgrade the east coast main line from 2019. The works are to be completed in the early 2020s and will enable faster, more frequent journeys with more seats. Building upon those works, the east coast main line route study has identified a broad range of investment choices. We are working closely with Transport for the North, Network Rail and High Speed 2 Ltd to assess which enhancements should be taken forward.

Kelvin Hopkins: In 1990, British Rail ran an express train from King’s Cross to Edinburgh with track cleared of other traffic in 3 hours and 30 minutes, including a two-minute stop at Newcastle. This was less time than planned for HS2, and with some additional four-tracking and two rail flyovers, the east coast main line could run regular 140 mph services in such times, and with the existing stock. Will Ministers look positively at such investment, as first proposed long ago by British Rail?

Andrew Jones: The key point to make is that we are carrying significantly more passengers on the east coast main line, and this investment will enable it to deliver faster and more frequent journeys with more seats between London and Edinburgh.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Minister back to the Dispatch Box. He will know from his previous time in the Department of my campaign for better train services into northern Lincolnshire, particularly a direct service from King’s Cross. May I invite him to visit northern Lincolnshire and to travel by train—a wonderful experience—and meet the major businesses in the area who have joined my campaign?

Andrew Jones: I always enjoy my visits to north Lincolnshire and will happily take up my hon. Friend’s invitation.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As the Minister will be aware, the east coast main line goes through my constituency of East Lothian. Can he confirm that,
following this review, the stations at East Linton and Reston in my neighbouring constituency are still on task to be reopened?

Andrew Jones: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is already in discussions on this very issue, and we will get back to the hon. Gentleman with detailed answers.

Mr Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) to ask Question 8. He is not here.

Cycling and Walking

9. Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to encourage cycling and walking.

Mr Seely: When will there potentially be a new round of funding to support new and upgraded cycle routes such as the planned cycle route in West Wight between Newport, Yarmouth and Freshwater, which will significantly improve our cycling offer on the island?

Jesse Norman: The Government have made available £1.2 billion under the cycling and walking investment strategy, and that has been supplemented by a range of other funds since then, including the local growth fund. Further funding is to be made available through the highways infrastructure fund and the future high-street funding programme just announced in the Budget. Further funding from 2020-21 onwards will be a matter for the spending review.

Emma Dent Coad: Some 5% of my constituents cycle to work, which is double the national average. However, CrashMap shows the number of accidents between my home and Parliament Square and that has frightened me off taking the plunge. In addition, today is our third day in a row of poor air quality alerts. Will the Minister please tell me, in road safety week, what we are doing to tackle the scourge of poor vision and behaviour of construction and delivery lorries and the problem of air quality, which are, literally, a deadly combination?

Jesse Norman: We are addressing these issues with the utmost seriousness. Today, we are publishing a cycling and walking safety review, with 50 actions designed to pull together a whole suite of Government policies and set in motion further work specifically designed to improve not merely cycling and walking safety, but also air quality and the fight on issues of health and obesity, and to improve access to high streets and economic productivity, all of which go to many of the general points the hon. Lady raises.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Following the success of the Tour of Britain in 2016, the Cheshire East Council leader called Congleton “The heart of cycling in Cheshire East”, and town councillor Suzie Akers Smith, who is mayor of Congleton this year, in our 700th year of having a mayor, made cycling her flagship project. Yet despite leading the development of a cycling masterplan for Congleton in 2016, more than two years later, after a number of funding applications and more than 400 meetings, Councillor Akers Smith has been unable to make any progress to obtain material substantive support for her project. Will the Minister meet me and the mayor to discuss this?

Jesse Norman: I am delighted to hear that Congleton has been declared the centre of cycling in Cheshire East, and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the problem in more detail.

Air Travel: Disabled People

11. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps he is taking to make air travel more accessible for disabled people.

Helen Whately: I welcome the Government’s work. Tomorrow, my private Member's Bill is due for its Second Reading. It sets out steps to improve the experience for disabled passengers, from car parking to getting on and off planes and, crucially, reducing damage to wheelchairs. Do I have the Government’s support for my Bill and my efforts overall to ensure that air travel is more accessible for everyone?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend’s Bill raises vital issues. I commend her for all her campaigning work and thank her for the opportunity to meet her and her constituents to discuss the matter. It is crucial that disabled air passengers are able to travel in comfort and with dignity, and independently if they wish. That is why we will continue to work with the Civil Aviation Authority to secure improvements throughout the industry.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): There have been many reports recently of disabled people suffering poor service when travelling by plane, yet we still await publication of the aviation strategy, which might offer some reassurance to disabled air passengers. Why has the strategy not been published? When will it be published?
Ms Ghani: The aviation strategy is due to be published, but the hon. Gentleman will have had sight of the inclusive transport strategy, which covers many elements of work to be done by the Civil Aviation Authority to ensure that accessibility, dignity and independent travel are delivered for passengers with disability as they are for passengers without disability.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Disabled access is equally important in our rail stations across the United Kingdom, which is why the Access for All scheme that my hon. Friend has commissioned is fantastic. I know that Montrose station in my constituency has already benefited. When will the next round of funding be released for the bids sent in?

Mr Speaker: The question is supposed to be about air, but I will allow a degree of flexibility.

Ms Ghani: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is very kind of you. The Access for All fund has £300 million, and we had more than 300 applications. Decisions on the stations that will be able to receive that extra funding will be made early next year.

Bus Journeys

13. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of bus journeys.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Local bus passenger journeys account for about 59% of all journeys made on public transport. The number of local bus passenger journeys in England fell by 1.5% to just over 4 billion in the year ending March 2017. The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced new powers for authorities and operators to work together to improve local bus services and grow passenger numbers.

Afzal Khan: Evidence shows that regulating buses improves services and bus patronage, so why are the Government siding with the bus companies rather than passengers by refusing to give councils such as Manchester’s powers to take back control of local buses?

Ms Ghani: The hon. Gentleman seems confused. When you wait for a bus, three come along at once: over £13 million of bus service operators’ grant has been made available to Manchester; the transforming cities fund has given the mayor authority £312 million to drive up intercity connectivity; and, moreover, the Mayor has the authority to ask for franchising, but he has not—I suggest that the hon. Gentleman and his Mayor just jump on the bus and ask for it.

Ms Ghani: I have been following the Select Committee inquiry very closely. It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman mentions Bristol, because bus passenger numbers have gone up by 42%. He raises a valid point, because punctuality, the timing of bus arrivals and departures, and journey times are key to increasing bus patronage, which is why we are increasing funding to make sure that information is available.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Since 2010, bus funding has been almost halved, fares have been increased by over 50% and thousands of routes have been cut, shrinking the network to its smallest size in decades. Does the Minister agree with the United Nations assessment of Tory transport policy:

“Abandoning people to the private market in relation to a service that affects every dimension of their basic well-being is incompatible with human rights requirements.”?

Ms Ghani: I would rather stick to the facts. We make over £1 billion of funding available for concessionary bus passes every year, and we continue to be committed to that. Some £250 million is paid to support bus services up and down the country. There is no denying that there are challenges in some parts of the country. However, the hon. Gentleman forgets to note that bus patronage is up by 42% in Bristol, up by 38% in South Gloucestershire and up by 31% in Central Bedfordshire. There are services that are working right, and local authorities are working with bus providers to make sure that up-to-date information is available.

Andy McDonald: Just as Conservative Members ridicule complaints about the state of our roads, the Government have dismissed the UN report as political. Let me tell the Minister that the decision to axe vital public services to fund tax cuts for millionaires, now that is political. Now the Prime Minister has declared that austerity is over, will the Minister commit to reversing these cruel and harmful cuts that are denying people their human rights?

Ms Ghani: I am afraid that Labour Front Benchers have run out of anything positive to say about any part of our transport infrastructure, even to support buses across the country. As I said, there is £1 billion of funding for concessionary bus travel. We are making franchising available to those mayoral authorities that wish to take it up, but they refuse to do so. [Interruption.] I do not know whether this is just going to go back and forth, but the fact is that we are putting funding into bus services, making sure they are greener, making sure that more information is available and making sure that more people can catch a bus.

TOCs: Derogations from Franchise Obligations

14. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What criteria his Department uses to assess train operating company requests for derogations from franchise obligations.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): A derogation is a deferral of a contracted obligation. Requests for derogations are assessed by considering the operator’s reasoning on why delivering
as contracted is not possible and the impact of the proposed deferral. Derogations will not be agreed if requested retrospectively.

**Richard Graham:** I am grateful to the rail Minister, who will know that, in its 2017 franchise award, CrossCountry’s intercity service was required to make two additional stops a day in the city of Gloucester, once the Network Rail works at Filton Bank are completed at the end of this year. Will the Minister celebrate his return to the Department for Transport by saying when this derogation will come to an end and when the operator will deliver those two additional services a day?

**Andrew Jones:** My hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on this issue. He is right to say that we want to see the services in the franchise resumed. The derogation was granted in March, and I know he has met my predecessor to discuss this issue. The works at Filton Bank are progressing, but this is a complex project. It is firmly on my radar, but perhaps I may ask him to meet me so that we can review the project and I can update him.

### A19: Safety Improvements

15. **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent steps his Department has taken to improve road safety on the A19.

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman):** Since 2011, Highways England has delivered safety improvements at many locations on the A19, and more are planned or are under way. For example, works to improve safety at Sheraton have commenced and are expected to complete by spring 2019. A safety review was undertaken along the A19 from Dishforth to the Tyne tunnel in summer 2018, in order to inform further interventions.

**Mr Hepburn:** The Minister will be aware that this week is Road Safety Week, and my two local newspapers, The Shields Gazette and the Sunderland Echo, are running a “Safe A19” campaign, backed by the local MPs. Bearing in mind that the Department’s safer roads fund was underspent by £75 million last year, will he commit funds to the A19 to alleviate local concerns?

**Jesse Norman:** I am grateful for the question. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the study of the A19’s safety has already been completed and is being analysed at the moment. The £75 million to which he refers was not underspent; the whole fund was used for the 50 schemes that were applied for and was fully discharged for that.

### Free Ports

16. **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of creating free ports in the UK.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** The Government have been clear that they are open to ideas that deliver economic advantages in the UK. Section 100A of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 provides the legal basis for the designation of free zones by the Treasury and will continue to do so following the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. Applying for designation as a free zone will be a commercial decision to be taken by private port operators.

**Douglas Chapman:** We are in uncharted waters as regards Brexit, and the danger is that Scottish exporters will not be able to access their European markets in the same way as they have done pre-Brexit. Does the Minister agree that this is the time to advantage ports such as Rosyth in my constituency and make sure that we have a strong ports sector in the future? Free ports would add into the benefits associated with doing that.

**Ms Ghani:** The cost and benefits of free port status will depend on the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations, but we in the Department are preparing for all outcomes. The hon. Gentleman will know that I will continue to work as hard as I can to ensure that our ports sector is promoted, and continues to be efficient and as competitive as possible.

### Strategic Road Network

17. **Neil O’Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the strategic road network.

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):** The Government have a massive investment programme taking place in our strategic road network, where we have just announced £25.3 billion for Highways England for the next road investment period. We are also committed to a substantial investment in the major road network, the next tier down of roads, and indeed in large local major roads, where some important connecting projects are needed around the country.

**Neil O’Brien:** The A6 in Kibworth in my constituency has a major problem with air quality and congestion every morning. Will the Secretary of State look closely, as part of plans for the major route network, at proposals from Leicestershire to solve that serious problem?

**Chris Grayling:** I hope the major road network fund will enable us to deal with problems such as the one my hon. Friend has identified. The A6 is one of the roads I expect to be eligible for that funding. I am pleased that we are moving ahead with that and particularly pleased with the first schemes we announced. We are doing what the Labour party never did, which is looking after Barrow-in-Furness and finally get rid of the Grizebeck bottleneck on the A595. That is the kind of thing Conservatives do for the north and Labour never did.

### Leaving the EU: Aviation Sector

18. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to help the aviation sector prepare for the UK leaving the EU.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the viability of the aviation sector of the UK leaving the EU.
The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): The UK Government and European Commission have agreed in principle that the two sides should negotiate a comprehensive air transport agreement, and the Department is working closely with the aviation sector to ensure its requirements are factored into the negotiations.

Martyn Day: The draft withdrawal agreement will have done little to alleviate the uncertainty of the aviation industry, and with the post-Brexit relationship yet to be negotiated and the risk of no deal increasing, can the Minister confirm whether the aviation agreement talks, which the Secretary of State earlier this month said were ready to start, have now begun? When does the Minister expect them to be concluded?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman is a keen student of Adam Smith and he will therefore know that free trade is constantly something that both sides will benefit from and will seek to derive gain. The conversations that he mentions continue and both sides have a strong interest in reaching a deal. That should be no cause for surprise, because the President of the European Council said on 7 March:

“I am determined to avoid that particularly absurd consequence of Brexit that is the disruption of flights between the UK and the EU”,

and he was right.

Chris Elmore: Less than a month ago, the Secretary of State told the aviation conference that it was theoretically possible that the European Aviation Safety Agency could refuse or delay the certification of UK-certified planes. Now we have even less time before we leave the EU, so can the Minister offer any more certainty to the aviation sector?

Jesse Norman: I can do no better than to remind the hon. Gentleman of the notice that was published on 13 November which said specifically that there would be reciprocity in operations between the UK and the EU in the air transport sector, that aviation safety certificates would remain valid for a period of time, and that passengers and cabin luggage from the UK would not need to be rescreened. This all points to the likelihood of a perfectly good, sensible and comprehensive agreement.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the Minister tell us whether Airbus, which is critical for Bristol jobs, and the other manufacturing industries in its supply chain will be able to maintain planes and move parts between the UK and the EU exactly as before if there is no deal?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Lady knows, we expect there to be a deal and there is every reason for there to be a deal. Contingency arrangements are already in place, and I would direct her to the technical notices that have been published on this topic.

Crossrail: Mayor of London

20. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Mayor of London on progress on delivering Crossrail.  [907787]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Secretary of State has regular discussions with the Mayor of London covering a variety of subjects, including progress on delivering Crossrail.

Alex Burghart: There have been reports in the media that Transport for London’s finances are in trouble. Crossrail reaches out into my constituency, with stations at Brentwood and Shenfield. Is the Minister concerned by these reports, and will this affect the delivery of Crossrail?

Andrew Jones: TfL’s finances are a matter for the Mayor of London, and Crossrail is a 100% owned subsidiary of TfL. It is becoming clearer how the Mayor’s policies are causing long-term problems with TfL’s finances, but the Government will continue to work with TfL as joint sponsors to oversee Crossrail’s delivery of the new railway as soon as possible.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the Mayor of London about the funding that the Department for Transport provides to London for Crossrail?

Andrew Jones: I know that the conversations involving the Secretary of State are extensive. I have not personally had any yet, as this is day 6, but I intend to pick up on those conversations in order to support my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we come to topical questions, I want to advise the House of a change in the order of business. After topical questions, we were due to have an urgent question on Bombardier, followed by the business question. In fact, what is now going to happen is that after topical questions we will have the business question, and after that there will be a ministerial statement on Bombardier. I have agreed to a request for such a change to be made. The rationale for it is not something that I need to go into now, but I am advising the House so that colleagues can make their preparations accordingly.

Topical Questions

T1. [907789] Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I shall start with some good news for the south-west. A couple of months ago, I announced that we would be extending the current public service obligation on flights from Newquay to Gatwick. I also spoke at the Dispatch Box about the potential benefits for Newquay airport and the south-west of a direct link to Heathrow, once Heathrow expands. I am pleased to say that that link is going to happen sooner, and that it will be starting in the spring of next year, supported by the Government. I think that it will provide a really good boost to business in the south-west, providing it with connections to important destinations around the world.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. The A27 in Chichester is at capacity and that is restricting economic growth. The local councils have approved their local plan review, which is now out for public consultation and, as is required to pass the process, it includes minor improvements to the road. The strategic solution, however, is the only viable answer
to the problems with the A27. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it is still the Department’s intention to fund major road improvements around Chichester in the recently increased road investment strategy 2—RIS2—budget?

Chris Grayling: I know how important this is to my hon. Friend and to many of her constituents. She will know that the divisions of opinion in the local community have put the project back by a number of years. I do not want to give her undue cause for optimism about its position in the queue, because it was certainly a setback when the local authority decided to reject Highways England’s plans, but it remains the view of the Government and Highways England that improvements in the area around her constituency will be necessary in the future.

T2. [907790] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In my recent community consultation, I heard growing concerns about bus services and prices, particularly from young people. Sheffield fares are as high as £3 for journeys of little more than a mile and a half. Throughout the country we have seen a 12-year low in the number of bus journeys. The spiral of decline started with Tory deregulation in the 1980s, but since 2010 bus budgets across England and Wales have been cut by 45%. When are the Government going to recognise that we need a new approach?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Bus patronage is different up and down the country. Those local authorities that work closely with their bus operators and use technology and concessionary fares appropriately see an increase in bus patronage. I mentioned earlier the areas in which patronage is going up—it is up 22% in Brighton and Hove—and there are areas throughout the country where younger people are jumping on buses, too. It is about making it work better, collectively; it is not just about money—even though there is more than £1 billion for concessionary fares and we have invested £250 million in bus services.

T3. [907791] Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Disruption on the M20, M26 and all roads in Kent is having a serious impact on the county’s economy. Schools are reporting that as many as 15% of students are getting in late, and businesses are already preparing for shift working in case their employees cannot get to work. That will cost serious time and serious money. That will cost serious time and serious money. For shift working in case their employees cannot get to work, and businesses are already preparing for shift working in case their employees cannot get to work.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): My hon. Friend will know, because we have met on many occasions and discussed this matter in the Chamber, that the Department is very focused on concerns in the south-east. Highways England is carrying out works on the M20 smart motorway scheme between junctions 3 and 5. That work is about relieving congestion and improving journeys. Of course, some disruption is inevitable—that goes with major programmes of road investment—but I will ask Highways England to investigate the effect of the current roadworks, and in particular the timing of the overnight closures on the M20.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If the Government really are serious about Northern Powerhouse Rail, will they commit to giving it precedence over Crossrail 2? Will they also commit to starting with the route from Hull to Leeds, as that part of the track has had very little investment over the years?

Chris Grayling: We remain absolutely committed to Northern Powerhouse Rail. I have been clear that the two projects—Crossrail 2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail—must march in lockstep. The hon. Lady will be aware that we have just provided an additional £40 million for the continuing development of Northern Powerhouse Rail. Transport for the North is working on the business case right now. We provided for passive provision for Northern Powerhouse Rail in the structure of HS2, so the necessary junctions will be there. We are very committed to the project.

T4. [907794] Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Following the massive reductions in bus services in parts of Stoke-on-Trent, does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential to take action to strengthen the local bus market to improve services in the city?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced a number of new tools to help local authorities to improve local bus services, including through partnership working and franchising. Stoke-on-Trent City Council has not yet engaged with my Department about using the new powers available, but we are working together to develop its proposals for the transforming cities fund. I was delighted that the council successfully applied for a share of the £1.7 billion fund.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Crime is soaring on the railways. It is up a fifth in the past year, and that is fuelled by a spike in sexual offences, which are up 16%, and violent crimes, which are up 26%. The highest increases are in areas where trains operate without guards—just one symptom of our broken franchise model. The guards in the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers are striking for passenger safety on Northern rail. Why will Ministers not follow the evidence and end the expansion of driver-only operation?

Chris Grayling: The problem is that even in areas where there is an offer to the RMT that guards will remain on the trains, they are still on strike. This strike is not about safety—the national safety regulator for the railways has said that it is nothing to do with safety. We are trying to deliver a better railway, and the reality is that if guards are not standing at the back of trains waiting to press a button, they are better able to look after passengers. It is also worth saying that on the new trains that are being introduced by this Government right across the country, the introduction of closed circuit television will make a real difference to safety. May I also pay tribute to the work of the British Transport police? They do an excellent job in trying to protect passengers on the railways.
T5. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will the Minister inform the House what progress is being made on creating apprentices in the transport sector?

Ms Ghani: There has been good progress, but we are committed to doing more. Leading transport employers are committed to providing quality apprenticeships, and more than 5,000 apprenticeships have been created in road and rail since 2016. In 2017-18 alone, we have seen a 22% on-year increase. Employers have committed to 10,000 apprenticeships with Heathrow expansion and 8,000 in express delivery. Training places for maritime cadets will rise to 1,200 each year over the next seven years, and we have seen 1,300 apprenticeship starts in road freight, but we are committed to doing more.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): We have known for five decades that there were 4,000 holes in Blackburn, Lancashire, but the number in Gateshead now far outstrips that—potholes I am talking about. When will we get some resources to the local authorities to mend the holes in our roads and to give drivers much-needed alleviation from the problem?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman’s concern. As I have already pointed out, the spike in potholes, to which he refers, originally occurred between 2005 and 2010. He asks when, and the answer is in the previous Budget where a specific £420 million in-year contribution was made. I do not have the numbers to hand, but if I did I have no doubt that I would find that multiple millions of pounds have been spent in his highway authority locally on potholes as a direct result of that funding announcement.

T6. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Following our summer of severe service disruption that saw Northern rail cancel more than 12,000 services, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can ensure that it does not happen next year? More important, though, can we also discuss the building of the South Fylde line, which will see the doubling of the service from once an hour to every half an hour, as it will be a huge boost to the Fylde coast?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): We have been very clear that disruption following the introduction of the May timetable was entirely unacceptable. I would, of course, be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his proposals and the work that is under way to ensure that we minimise the risk of disruption for future timetable changes.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Ministers will be aware of the work that is being carried out by Bridgend County Borough Council, me and my Assembly Member to try to close the Pencoed level crossing following safety concerns. Network Rail is now agreeing to regular meetings to try to progress the closure. It tells me that it needs more funding from the Department for Transport. Wales Office officials have now agreed to attend these three-monthly meetings to be able to progress the closure and improve infrastructure. Will Ministers now agree to their officials attending these meetings so that we can make some progress on closing this dangerous level crossing?

Andrew Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have to say that I am not immediately familiar with that particular level crossing, but I will, of course, look into it and get back to him with the answer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) is in a category of her own. She is the only hon. Member standing who has thus far not asked a question this morning. I know that colleagues will agree, in a spirit of equality, that their own need is secondary to hers.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the review into non-statutory property schemes for High Speed 2, and why did it fail to deliver a bespoke package for Long Eaton, which has been promised by Ministers on more than one occasion?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and I have had many discussions about Long Eaton. I am very keen to make sure that we have done the right thing by the different people affected by the proposed railway line through Long Eaton, whether it is the businesses affected or the people who live in the railway cottages. If there are things that we are not yet doing, I suggest that she and I sit down and go through it again.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It costs me more to get a bus a few stops up the West Road in Newcastle than to cross the whole of London. It costs more to get a bus from Newcastle to Amble—30 miles—than to get a bus from London to Newcastle—290 miles. Can we have a comparative study of the cost of bus travel in Newcastle under a Tory Government and in London under a Labour Mayor?

Ms Ghani: Managing bus fares and having transparency on bus fares will further encourage bus patronage. Those bus companies that make bus fares available and public will always see an increase in bus patronage. We are working with the bus sector to do what we can to make sure that this information is available, just as it can be available on journey times and at stops, too.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement and the Department for Transport’s ongoing commitment to connecting Cornwall. What assessment has he made in light of today’s announcement on Heathrow of the potential for exports from Cornish businesses and for inbound tourism, and of their effect on the Cornish economy?

Chris Grayling: Improving transport connections for the south-west is essential, and it is one of the parts of the country that needs those improved transport links. A range of things are happening: the number of local trains within Devon and Cornwall is increasing, new trains are now serving that route, and road improvements have taken place. Now, there will be a better link for business into Heathrow airport. This is all part of making sure that we deliver on our promises for better transport in the south-west.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order.
Business of the House

10.35 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please set out the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will be:

Monday 26 November—A general debate on the 100-year anniversary of the Royal Air Force.

Tuesday 27 November—Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [Lords].

Wednesday 28 November—Remaining stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

Thursday 29 November—A general debate on improving education standards.

Friday 30 November—The House will not be sitting.

This week marks the centenary of the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, which first allowed women in the UK to become MPs. Since then, 489 women have been elected to Parliament, compared with more than 4,500 men. Clearly, we have a way to go to achieve a 50:50 Parliament, but I was encouraged to see so many enthusiastic women come to Westminster yesterday, including some of my constituents, as part of the Ask Her to Stand campaign.

This week is also Road Safety Week, an initiative to inspire thousands of schools, organisations and communities to take action on road safety and promote life-saving messages. I was pleased to provide time for debate on this vital issue earlier this month.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the short business statement. Again, the date for the Easter recess has not been fixed. I remind the Leader of the House that Easter is on 21 April, so it cannot be beyond the Government’s capability to work out the recess dates around that. Will she also say what the position is on the sitting days for consideration of private Members’ Bills?

There is nothing but a general debate on two of the days next week. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Prime Minister will make a statement following the special summit of the EU on 25 November, whether it has been postponed or not, as I understand that the Prime Minister is also meeting Jean-Claude Juncker?

I want to correct the record. Last week’s Official Report makes ghastly reading. The Leader of the House said that she wanted to see some evidence, but obviously she was not in the Chamber—she was discussing the deal at No. 10—when a number of points of order were raised about when Parliament would be told about the deal. There was genuine disbelief from hon. Members raised about when Parliament would be told about the deal at No. 10—when a number of points of order were raised about that. Will she also say what the position is on the sitting days for consideration of private Members’ Bills?

So our positive action—[Interruption.] Ooh, very sensitive!
Our positive action is like a pyramid; we have a solid base. We, too, had two female leaders, and I can say to the House that they were not acting—they were doing it for real. However, it is good to celebrate a House that represents the full diversity of our country.

Finally, I want to send Harry Leslie Smith our good wishes for a speedy recovery. Harry is a political commentator and outspoken campaigner against austerity and the privatisation of the NHS. He is a former RAF pilot and a veteran of the second world war. He is in hospital, and we wish him a speedy recovery.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for going through a smörgåsbord of different subjects, as she always does.

On Easter recesses, we have talked about this a great deal. I have gently pointed out to the hon. Lady, on every occasion, that her party’s Government, when in office, were extremely tardy in announcing Easter recess dates. I, on the other hand, have been pleased to announce Christmas recess dates and February recess dates, and I will announce Easter recess dates in due course. She will appreciate that there is some quite serious business to be got through in this place before we recess for Easter.

The hon. Lady asks about private Members’ Bills. She will be aware, no doubt, that I have tabled a motion to provide the House with an additional three sitting Fridays, and that this motion has been objected to. I am keen for the House to have more days to debate private Members’ Bills, and I will bring another motion back very soon.

On the PM’s statement, as always, the Prime Minister makes a statement to the House as soon as she is able to, particularly after EU Council matters, and particularly at the present time when she fully respects that this House needs to know exactly what is going on with regard to the UK leaving the European Union. Frankly, I am sorry, but I just did not understand what the hon. Lady was suggesting needed correcting in the record. The Prime Minister came to the House last week as soon as she was able to. There was no sense in which the Government finished the business early. The House finished the business early—it was nothing to do with the Government.

The hon. Lady asks about legal advice with reference to the Humble Address that her party put forward. As I have said, there is a legitimate desire in Parliament from Members of all parties to understand the legal implications of the deal once it is finalised. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has agreed that the Government will make available to all Members of the House a full, reasoned position statement laying out the Government’s legal position on the withdrawal agreement, and that the Attorney General will assist further by making an oral statement and taking questions in the normal way. We have always said that Parliament will have the appropriate information ahead of the vote on the final deal.

The hon. Lady asks about the gang of five. There is no gang of five, and there never was. She might think that everything she reads in the papers is true, but on the Government side of the House nobody is that naive, including when it comes to Cabinet leaks and journalists’ suppositions. She asks about the Procedure Committee report. As she knows, I take all Select Committee reports very seriously. I have seen the Procedure Committee’s report—it makes some interesting suggestions and fully acknowledges the need for a clear answer to be given to the Government on whether the House agrees to the Government proceeding with the withdrawal agreement as it stands—and we will respond in good time.

The hon. Lady asks about the meaningful vote. Again, the meaningful vote will be approved through the responsibility of the House of Commons alone. She will appreciate that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 confirmed that Parliament would have the ultimate role in delivering the will of the people. Once the deal is agreed, it will be put to Parliament, and MPs will have the decision on whether to back it or reject it, but people should not be under any illusion that the EU would be prepared to start all over again and negotiate a different deal. It is very important, therefore, that we end up with a straightforward approval of the deal.

The hon. Lady talks about the Finance Bill. As the Minister made clear, it was agreed that the Opposition amendments were seeking clarification on Government manifesto commitments, and it was considered entirely reasonable to seek further information.

Finally, the hon. Lady talks about the achievement of the Labour party in having more women MPs. I should point out that the Conservative party is extremely proud to have had two female Prime Ministers who have presided over this country at times of great stress and have shown their determination and commitment. All women and men across the House should be proud of the achievements of women.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on changing practices in how we buy and sell goods? There is little doubt that the impact of online shopping has produced a disconnect between shops and customers, so I think we need a strategy and taskforce—but not one led by some dodgy entrepreneur.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an important point. In March, we established the industry-led Retail Sector Council to bring Government and industry together and boost the sector’s productivity. The council last met on 12 November and has agreed its priority work for the next two years. In addition, we announced measures in the Budget as part of an action plan to support the sustainable transformation of our high streets, including a £675 million future high streets fund.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the rather paltry business for next week. I know we say this every week, but what a week! Norman Lamont famously said of the equally disastrous and chaotic Major Government that “they give the impression of being in office but not in power”. This Government do not even give the impression of being in office, far less of being in power. First, they refuse to vote on Opposition day motions; now they just refuse to vote.

With the DUP plug well and truly pulled, they have started to realise the reality of minority government and that they can no longer be assured of getting
anything through the House. The only thing likely to save them is Labour’s indiscretion and failure to get its vote out. It is the only party that can look a gift horse in the rear end. We managed to get two amendments to the Finance Bill through on Tuesday, which is more than we achieved in the preceding 20 years, so three cheers for zombie government! Can we have a debate on parliamentary democracy so that we can learn the Government’s position on the basic concept of voting?

We have had a welcome dose of reality from the new Work and Pensions Secretary, who revealed that this binary choice of a bad deal or no deal would not happen when she said that the House of Commons would not accept no deal. Then there is the Chief Secretary to the Treasury saying there might be no Brexit. Then there is the calzone collective’s own options for Brexit. Everybody knows that the Prime Minister’s deal will not get through the House, and everybody and their auntie knows that the House will never accept a no deal Brexit, so will the Leader of the House finally confirm that this “devil or the deep blue sea” option is over and that the House will choose the option it wants?

Lastly, I very much welcome the Tay cities deal, which was signed off in my constituency this morning, bringing in £150 million of UK Government spending and £200 million of Scottish Government spending. It will be transformative for Tayside, with investment going into a number of fantastic projects right across the region. I am sure the Leader of the House will want to welcome that great example of cross-Parliament co-operation and working together.

**Andrea Leadsom:** May I first announce to the House that the Prime Minister will be making a statement to the House later today?

I would like to answer the hon. Gentleman’s fine set of questions. I am delighted to hear him admit that the only achievement of the Scottish nationalists in all the time that they have been sitting in this House is two amendments to the Finance Bill, seeking some further information. I am not sure that the people of Scotland will feel that they are worth the effort. My Conservative colleagues who represent seats in Scotland are doing rather better; perhaps we could hear more about that as business questions progresses.

The hon. Gentleman asked what my view is of us leaving the European Union. I can tell him that I agreed with the Prime Minister when she said yesterday that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. I sit on the committee that is looking at day-one readiness in all eventualities. Preparations are far advanced for no deal. We absolutely intend to get a deal that Parliament can support, but we will definitely be leaving the European Union in March 2019.

Finally, I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is delighted about the Tay cities deal, which brings investment from the UK Government, the Scottish Government and business and is welcome right around the United Kingdom.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Many Members will have great sympathy with what my hon. Friend talks about. We need to do more to protect the rights of people who own their own homes and find that the freehold is sold from underneath them. The Secretary of State is looking carefully at that, and I encourage my hon. Friend to ask a written question, to get a direct answer.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I note that the Government have tabled general debates on Monday and Thursday next week, as well as a general debate on the armed forces covenant this afternoon. It is now five weeks since the Backbench Business Committee had any time in this Chamber, and we are not likely to get any more for at least another fortnight. If the Government’s intention at the start of this two-year Session was to have the 27 days of Backbench time in the first year and none in the second, it is a great shame that the Committee was not informed of that intention at the outset.

It seems as though the Committee and Back Benchers are not being allocated a fair amount of time to air their concerns. Many hundreds—and I mean hundreds—of Back Benchers have signed up to debates we have on a list that are as yet unheard. Back Benchers are being served badly by the timetabling of business by this Government. While general debates on Government matters are very important, the Backbench Business Committee was established to meet a problem that was recognised by the House, and it is not now being facilitated by time from the Government to do so.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman’s desire to ensure that his Committee has any more for at least another fortnight. If the Government’s intention at the start of this two-year Session was to have the 27 days of Backbench time in the first year and none in the second, it is a great shame that the Committee was not informed of that intention at the outset.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): My post office is proposing to relocate the counters from its main branch to a WH Smith shop in a covered mall where there is no free, accessible disabled parking. Royal Mail owns the site where its counters currently are, but it says it is not planning to close its sorting office or its operation there. May we have a debate on the validity of, and allegations of falseness about, the post office consultation, as many people believe that its move is already a done deal?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, which has been raised in the Chamber during business questions before. I can say to him that combining a post office with a successful retailer is a proven model. Over 97% of the network already operates in this way. The Government have invested nearly £2 billion in the Post Office for the period 2010 to 2018 to maintain and
modernise the branch network, which is good news for post office users. He may be aware that the public consultation on the proposals for Crawley post office runs until 12 December. The post office is welcoming customer views on areas such as accessibility, as well as wider community issues, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be providing evidence to it.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On the evening before bonfire night, I spent an eight-hour shift with West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service. Acting firefighter Sherriff was very impressed with its professionalism, but was also struck by the severe impacts that the cuts have had on its service. May we have a debate on the funding awarded to our wonderful fire and rescue services?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Lady on spending time with firefighters. I have also done that, and it is a real opportunity to see their priorities at first hand. I want to congratulate them all on their commitment to keeping people safe. She will be aware that we have questions to Home Office Ministers on 3 December, and she may want to raise the issue of cuts directly with them.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Scotland is already the highest-taxed part of the United Kingdom, but unless the SNP Scottish Government follow the lead of the Chancellor and bring more middle income earners out of the 40p tax rate, this gap is going to grow even wider. I am already hearing from employers on the Scottish borders that this issue is making the recruitment and retention of staff all the more difficult. May we have a debate on the implications of the higher taxation in Scotland on recruitment, employment and business opportunity?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad my hon. Friend acknowledges that the Budget was very good news for middle income earners, with the Chancellor announcing both a rise in the tax-free personal allowance and a higher-rate threshold increase. This puts money back in the pockets of hard-working individuals and families, and supports our strong economy. My hon. Friend raises a very serious point about border businesses and those subject to Scotland’s higher taxes. Although this is a devolved matter for the Scottish Government, I hope that SNP Members are listening very carefully, because they do not want to see Scotland’s economy less competitive than that on the other side of the border.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Yesterday, I met members of the Youth Parliament to discuss their campaign on knife crime and how we can work together to ensure that tackling knife crime with a public health approach is debated in this House. Over 1 million young people voted in the Youth Parliament’s recent ballot, so I am pretty sure that they would not struggle to get the signatures to secure a debate here. However, it is important that this is debated in Government time, and I am sure the Leader of the House absolutely agrees with me. Just for the eighth time, I am asking: when will this be debated here?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend the hon. Lady for her commitment to this issue. She will be aware that those 1 million young people could, and I thoroughly recommend that they do, raise a petition to give their particular views to Parliament. As she will know, the Government have set up a serious violence taskforce, which is seeking to invest in measures to prevent young people getting into a life of crime, violence and gang membership. The Government are doing a huge amount. I am sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s desire for a debate on this subject, and I am looking into that, as well as writing to the Home Office on her behalf.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the people of Crickhowell on winning the title of “UK’s best high street” in last week’s Great British High Street awards? Will she accept an invitation to visit Brecon and Radnorshire to see that excellence for herself, and will she allow time for a debate on how we can revitalise our high streets in the UK and follow Crickhowell’s example?

Andrea Leadsom: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Crickhowell on its excellent award. I was there in January this year with my family—we stayed at the fantastic Bear Hotel—and I agree that it is a superb high street. These awards shine a light on the good work being done in high street communities across the UK, and I congratulate all the other winning high streets that were recognised by those awards.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May we have an early debate on atrial fibrillation, which means an irregular pulse? If someone has an irregular pulse—as many Members of the House will have—they have a much higher likelihood of having a stroke. Up and down the country, GPs are failing to diagnose, failing to test, and even when they recognise the condition, they are prescribing aspirins that, if they do anything, do harm. Four new wonderful anticoagulant drugs can relieve people’s stress and this condition, and they could be a real life changer. May we have an early debate on the significant failure of UK GPs to prescribe the right drugs?

Andrea Leadsom: As he often does, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point that affects people’s lives. I have a family member who suffers from this condition, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise it. Health questions is on Tuesday, and I encourage him to ask Ministers directly what more can be done.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): About an hour ago, partners from different levels of Government signed the Tay cities deal, which means £150 million of UK Government money coming to the region, over £65 million of which will go to the county of Perth and Kinross, which I share with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). That is fantastic news, but the city deal process involves many different partners and layers of Government. May we have a debate to discuss how we can improve the process for the future, so that all levels of Government in all parts of the UK benefit?

Andrea Leadsom: People across the UK are delighted at the investment going into the Tay cities deal, which will provide a real boost for people and businesses in that area. I am always delighted to hear from colleagues across the House about ways to improve negotiations.
on city deals, and I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, or encourage him to seek a meeting directly with a Treasury Minister to discuss the process.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Popular counterfeit products can contain less than half the internal components required to run safely, leaving people at risk of serious injury or property damage. With that in mind, and with Christmas fast approaching, may we have a debate on the steps that the Government are taking to disrupt counterfeiters, dismantle their infrastructure, and protect UK businesses and citizens from fake goods?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a good point—as she says, particularly in the run-up to Christmas it is important to protect consumers from buying counterfeit goods. I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that hon. Members can share their constituents’ experiences and ideas about how we can do better.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I recently met the family of Asia Bibi, who has been persecuted for her faith and whose life is in grave danger. One hundred and twenty-five parliamentarians from across the House, including Lords Spiritual, have written to the Prime Minister asking the Government to do the right thing morally in granting asylum to that persecuted family. May we have an urgent statement and/or debate in Government time on religious freedom, and on the Government living up to their British values of standing up for the rule of law, justice, and helping those who are persecuted?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a vital issue about avoiding the persecution of people for their religious faith. He is absolutely right to do that and I know all hon. Members are concerned about the fate of Asia Bibi in particular. I can tell him that we have Church Commissioners questions next Thursday, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions the following week. He might want to raise the matter directly with Ministers then.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Is the Leader of the House aware of the report published today on managed migration to universal credit by the Work and Pensions Committee, which shows that the vast majority of people will move on to universal credit not within the managed migration system, as was promised to this House when the cuts were put in place, but without any transitional protection whatever? They are set to lose thousands of pounds immediately. Will she ask the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to look at this seriously and make an urgent statement to the House?

Andrea Leadsom: What I can say to the hon. Lady is that there are lots of rumours about universal credit. The Government have listened very carefully to concerns and have continuously improved universal credit. The Government have increased advances to 100% of a full monthly payment so that those who need it can get access to that money on day one, scrapped the seven days’ waiting and introduced a two-week overlap of housing benefit payments—all of which Labour voted against. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced that we will increase the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit is reduced and we have given all self-employed people 12 months to get their business off the ground. So I do think that the Government have listened very carefully. Universal credit is significantly better than the legacy benefits it replaces. It makes it easier and better for people to get into work, which is better for them, for their families and for our economy.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Paragraph 56 of the Procedure Committee’s recent report recommends that a Business of the House motion is published five sitting days in advance of the debate on the meaningful vote, that a full day’s debate be allowed for that, and that that should take place no fewer than two days in advance of the meaningful vote. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on her response to that, given that if the debate on the meaningful vote is to start on 3 December, the Business of the House motion should have been published yesterday?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a matter that is of great significance at the present time to the House. What I can say to him is that the Government’s goal is to secure certainty and clarity for the public after two years of negotiations. I have seen the Procedure Committee report and the Government are considering its recommendations carefully, although it will be for Parliament to debate and determine the procedure that will apply for the vote.

Mr Speaker: That is absolutely true. It is also true, of course, that the Government have made clear their commitment to an amendable motion. The Leader of the House has said that a number of times in the Chamber and the point has been made by the Prime Minister as well. I know there has been no movement from that position at all. An amendable motion will be put to the House. I think it is important to be clear about that.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate on the importance of British food and drink? Instead of Peroni and pizza, would it not be better if the infamous five group had something like Somerset cider, cheddar cheese and Jacob’s crackers?

Andrea Leadsom: I sincerely hope the hon. Gentleman is not alluding to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) when he makes his comment about Jacob’s. I absolutely share his enthusiasm for the UK food and drink sector. Right across the UK, we have superb brands and superb food producers. I think we would all share in the desire to do more to promote UK goods overseas.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Mr Speaker, as you are well aware, repetition is not a novelty in this place. I, too, would like to welcome the Tay cities deal, which was announced this morning, with £150 million for the Tayside region. The UK Government have invested an extra £1.1 billion in Scottish city deals. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate on how important it is for the UK Government and the Scottish Government to work together for the betterment of areas such as my constituency of Angus?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is vital for the Scottish Government and UK Government to work together closely for the success of
the entire United Kingdom. We on the Government Benches always seek to consult widely and collaborate with the Scottish Government in our desire to see the strengthening of the United Kingdom. I am very pleased and proud that we have such a good group of Scottish Conservatives who are always willing to put the interests of the United Kingdom and Scotland together.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): In the Leader of the House’s opening remarks, she mentioned the #AskHerToStand events yesterday, and she may be aware that I raised a point of order with Mr Speaker in relation to a report from three years ago that asked that the Standing Orders of the House either be gender-neutral or do not use the male pronoun. The report is some three years old. I know that you are supportive of the change, Mr Speaker. I accept that the Leader of the House was not in her position when that came forward, but she is a champion of equality and women’s rights in this Chamber, so will she either adopt that report from three years ago or, if there is a new report from the Procedure Committee—which I will be pushing for next week—calling for new Standing Orders to be published, agree to those in full so that we genuinely have a House that allows women to take seats in it?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising his point of order the other day. I heard part of it, but I will now go away and look carefully at what he said, and give consideration to his suggestion.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): There are some fantastic opportunities for smaller businesses to export right around the world when we leave the EU, so will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on the export opportunities for the many smaller manufacturers in areas such as Stoke-on-Trent from the new trade deals that we hope to pursue?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and I absolutely agree with him that there will be great opportunities for all businesses in the United Kingdom as we leave the European Union and are able to seek free trade deals across the world. I encourage him perhaps to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss, particularly with Ministers in the Department for International Trade, precisely what the impact could be for Stoke-on-Trent and his constituency.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): As well as the centenary of women’s suffrage, this week is also the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918, which is celebrated in early-day motion 735.

Jack Brereton: That this House recognises that 2018 marks the centenary of the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act, which established in law the principle of state funding for Catholic schools in Scotland; notes the range of celebrations planned by the Scottish Catholic education community to mark the ongoing collaboration between Church and State; believes that the arrangements put in place by the Act represent a distinctive collaboration for the governance of schools, families, parishes and local communities across Scotland; notes the continuing support of government and all of the main political parties is encouraging for the future of denominational schools; further notes that during 2018 schools, families, parishes and local communities across Scotland will reflect on the past, the present and the future of Catholic Schools, using the theme, Catholic Schools: Good For Scotland as a way to highlight the contribution Catholic schools make to wider society; and notes that by working with elected members from local authorities, and the UK and Scottish Parliaments, the Catholic Education Community aims to show that this distinctive collaboration for the governance of schools continues to reflect the diverse, inclusive and progressive nature of Scotland.

We were joined yesterday by the Archbishops of Glasgow and of St Andrews and Edinburgh here in Parliament. Can we have a debate or a statement on Catholic education in Scotland, and does the Leader of the House agree that Catholic schools are good for Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate all Scottish MPs on the anniversary that they are celebrating. There is a debate on education next Thursday, and the hon. Gentleman might well like to raise this issue there.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The Leader of the House has been phenomenal in her work to try to tackle bullying and harassment in this place, and I am sure that she was more appalled than anyone by the recent decision in the other place. What more can my right hon. Friend do to give people confidence to come forward with their issues and that they will not see them blocked by the use of petty parliamentary procedure?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that my hon. Friend raised this issue. I want to make it clear that I am personally disgusted by what took place in the other place. It is not right that this matter should be allowed to rest, and I know that colleagues in the other place are taking it very seriously. I and the members of the former steering group on the complaints procedure strongly agree with Lord McFall of Alcluith when he said that he was “deeply disappointed” with the decision of the House of Lords to send the report into the Conduct Committee. In particular, the former steering group sympathises with the complainant at what must be a very difficult time for her. This is, however, a matter for the House of Lords, and I note that Lord McFall has made it clear that the Committee will consider the decision of the House and will look to present a further report to the House that will fully explain the Committee’s position.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Next year, I hope that Ministers will agree to extend the M11 through Lincolnshire to the Humber Bridge during the 2020s, funded from the £28 billion for the national roads fund, which was announced in the Budget. With the success of halving the Humber Bridge tolls and with the Severn Bridge tolls being abolished on 17 December this year, can we have a debate on whether extending the M11 to the Humber Bridge will be the right time to scrap the Humber Bridge tolls once and for all?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is assiduous in raising important constituency matters and she is absolutely right to do so. I hope that she took advantage of Department for Transport questions just now to raise that issue directly with Ministers. The Chamber has heard her request and she will have further opportunities to raise it with Ministers in the coming weeks.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I recently met a delegation of constituents from the Horn Park estate to lobby the Greenwich clinical commissioning group about the closure of a nurse-led drop-in centre on the estate, and to ask the CCG to reopen it. The closure has left my constituents with three-week waits for GP appointments and long journey times to alternative services. May we have a debate about GP waiting times, and also about public consultation by clinical commissioning groups? The situation in that part of my constituency is simply unacceptable.

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear of the hon. Gentleman’s concern about his constituency. We shall have health questions next week, and I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers then.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Although my constituent Jean Allardyce of Bridgend Garage in Auchinleck always pays her PAYE and national insurance contributions on time, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs often sends her debt-chasing letters, the most recent of which was dated more than a week after she had made the payments. This causes her stress. She has to take valuable business time out to make checks, and HMRC then has to make further checks. May we have a Government statement about simple reforms that HMRC can make in order to tackle the real culprits?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point about wasted administrative processes. I encourage him to raise it in a written parliamentary question to Ministers so that they can consider his suggestion.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On 9 May, 12 July and 6 September, I asked the Leader of the House about the whereabouts of the immigration Bill. I think that there is still no answer, but let me give her a break and ask her about a different Bill. Would not the Home Office be able to make some progress in the way that the Royal Navy has done? May we have a written answer on that issue directly with Ministers so that Members can share the experiences of their young people and how they have really made a difference around the world.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue in connection with bringing people to this country, and I am sure that he will have the opportunity to raise it with Ministers in the coming weeks.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am sure the hon. Lady will be aware of the recent decision by Talgo, the Spanish train manufacturer, to site its new manufacturing plant in Kincardine in my constituency, thus creating more than 1,000 new jobs. It is a huge investment, and it constitutes a vote of confidence not only in my constituency but in Scottish Engineering and “Team Scotland”, which worked hard to put the deal together. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time on the importance of inward investment in post-Brexit Britain?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. I am delighted for the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, and I am also delighted at the endorsement of the engineering strengths in Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole—and, of course, the confidence that that shows in the UK once we have left the European Union. According to one of the latest figures, the UK is one of the biggest beneficiaries of foreign direct investment other than China, which is a great endorsement of the strengths of the UK economy.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Since 2001, the St Paul’s youth forum project Bolt FM in my constituency has empowered young people in the north-east of Glasgow to run a community-led radio station. They branched out in July, when five of them went to Zambia on an international exchange programme, where they helped with four projects. On returning to Glasgow, the young people took the initiative, and began planning a fundraising ball to raise money for those projects. With little experience of organising such events, they still managed to raise more than £1,000, which was a great achievement. The ball was held on 6 October. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those young people, and will she consider allowing a debate in Government time on the contribution that young people make to international development?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the whole House will want to congratulate that group of young people on an amazing achievement. It is superb to see what communities and volunteers can do when they really set their minds to it. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek a Westminster Hall debate, so that Members can share the experiences of their young people and how they have really made a difference around the world.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): So far the Leader of the House has been somewhat vague and opaque in her remarks about the Procedure Committee report. The key recommendation was that the amendments should be debated and voted on before the main motion. Can she assure the House now that she and the new Brexit Secretary will table a business motion setting out a process enabling amendments to be debated and voted on first?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said in response to a number of questions on the Procedure Committee’s report, I have seen it and I have looked at it very carefully. The Government are considering its recommendations. It will be for Parliament to decide—to debate and determine the procedure that will apply to the vote, including the number of amendments that can be voted on. But as the Procedure Committee report sets out, amendments threaten an orderly ratification, and that risks creating huge uncertainty for business, consumers and citizens.

Mr Speaker: The Government have already promised an amendable motion and the Leader of the House has herself done so on the Floor of the House. I hope that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) is at least reassured by that. There will be further discussion of these important matters, as the Leader of the House has said, but I hope the hon. Lady is reassured by that fact, of which there is evidence in the Official Report.
Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It was a great pleasure yesterday to welcome Judith Dunn, my constituent, to ask her to stand. She had an entertaining, educational and inspiring day in Parliament, and I thank all those who organised that. Also on Tuesday I was able to welcome the Teapot Trust, who invited people to do a doodle. I was grateful to various Health Ministers and shadow Health Ministers who attended. May we have a Government debate on the importance of art and culture for the mental health wellbeing not just of children, whom the Teapot Trust works with, but all of us across the United Kingdom?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman's remarks are obviously welcomed by the House. He is right to point out the contribution of the arts and all creative subjects in the health and wellbeing of the nation, and I am sure there would be great support for a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can share their constituents' experiences.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am hopeful that the Leader of the House can help me with a problem that the Home Office seems to be having in answering my named day written questions. For example, I tabled one on settled status on 9 October and it took until 12 November and a chaser question to get an answer, and I am currently waiting for an answer to one that was tabled on 31 October as a named day question regarding settled status payments. May we have a statement on what has gone wrong and how this can be improved?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is waiting for some replies. We do have Home Office questions on Monday 3 December, but if he wants to write to me, I can chase those matters up on his behalf.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You said in business questions on two occasions that the Government will table an amendable motion, which is also the understanding of the whole House. However, the Government have also said that, regardless of what happens to that amendable motion, they will only put the option of the Government's take-it-or-leave-it deal. Do you know anything more about this process? Will this amendable motion be taken to the House with a range of options, or is it your understanding that all that will be put to the House is the Government's deal on a take-it-or-leave-it basis?

Mr Speaker: I think that this is an issue still in progress. [ Interruption. ] The Procedure Committee has produced a report in which it has helpfully set out, if memory serves me correctly—[ Interruption. ] Perhaps I can happily wait. I think it would be a courtesy if Members would listen as I respond to a point that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has legitimately raised. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. [ Interruption. ] May I just ask the Leader of the House if she will do me the courtesy of listening while I respond to the point of order from the hon. Gentleman, as I did her the courtesy of listening to her responses to the business question?

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire has raised an important issue, on which the right hon. Lady had some remarks to make a few moments ago. I was simply saying to him that the matter is still in progress. The Procedure Committee has produced a report in which it sets out—

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): She's doing it again!

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): It is a discoursity to the House.

Mr Speaker: Well, I can live with that. The Procedure Committee has produced a report in which it sets out three options for the handling of this matter. If memory serves me correctly, the Committee has indicated its view that the motion should be amendable and that amendments, in accordance with the normal procedure, shall be voted upon first. The Government will have an opportunity, if they wish, to respond to that report, and a business of the House motion from the Government is to be expected. I rather imagine that will happen before the debate, and certainly before the meaningful vote. But that there is to be an amendable motion is not something coming from me; it is a commitment that has already been made both by the Prime Minister and by the Leader of the House on the Floor of this House. That much is simple and incontrovertible. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire. I am sure he will keep an eye on the matter.

John Spellar: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not only disrespectful to yourself but, quite frankly, disrespectful to the House that, during a point of order relating to procedure, for which the Leader of the House is responsible not just for the Government but to the whole House, she should indulge consistently in a conversation? [ Interruption. ] She has now scuttled out. She indulged consistently in a conversation while you were giving a judgment on important issues relating to an enormously important matter of procedure.

Mr Speaker: My shoulders are broad and I am happy to work on that basis, but there is an issue of courtesy to the House. I do not think any deliberate discourtesy was intended but, whatever people's intentions, the facts of the matter are on the record. The fact is that there is a commitment to an amendable motion. The House may have an opportunity to consider the Procedure Committee's report, or if it does not, the Government will in any case have to table some sort of motion for the consideration of matters. This issue will not go away, and I feel sure that the strength of feeling across the House one way or the other will be heard. The Chair is attuned to the strength of feeling, and the Chair is
certainly very respectful of the position taken by the Procedure Committee, which has long been regarded as a very important voice—even authority—on these matters.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We do not mention or identify officials in this place, and rightly so, but may I ask if it is not also utterly unacceptable that officials standing and leaving the official Box just now were smirking and shaking their heads at my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) as he was making his point of order? They have gone now, but is it not unacceptable for officials who are here to do a job to make comments in such a visual fashion against a senior Member of this House?

Mr Speaker: I do not have eyes in the back of my head, I did not note any disorderly behaviour and certainly I allege no disorderly behaviour on the part of anyone in the Box. Suffice it to say that, very briefly, I sat in that Box as a special adviser 23 years ago, and I remember being told very clearly that officials are there to sit and provide papers or advice if required, and discreetly and respectfully to observe proceedings. The right hon. Member for Warley is a very senior and respected Member of this House. What anyone outside this House or performing an ancillary function thinks about what he is saying is of no interest to me, of no interest to the right hon. Gentleman, and, I rather imagine, of no interest to the House.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been in this House a very long time—people usually say too long—but in all my time here I have never seen a Leader of the House act with such disrespect and then flounce out of the Chamber, with her officials following out in the same way and showing their dislike of something a right hon. Member has just said. I am sensitive, however, to what the right hon. Gentleman has said, and I think some of these concerns may play out in discussions to follow in the coming days. I hope that is fair and reasonable to people of all views.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you confirm that, when the Government bring forward a business motion, it is open to any Member of the House to table amendments to that business motion, on which the House will be able to take a view?

Mr Speaker: It is.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Following Bombardier’s announcement that it plans to reduce its workforce by 490 employees at its Belfast aerostructures site, I have this morning spoken to Michael Ryan, the chief operating officer of aerostructures and engineering services, and arranged a follow-up meeting with him later this afternoon. This follows the company’s announcement earlier this month that a further 5,000 staff from its global workforce will need to leave it over the next 12 to 18 months.

I understand that the employee consultation period of 90 days has now been triggered. During this time, Bombardier will be doing what it can to mitigate the number of compulsory redundancies required, including considering the possibility of voluntary redundancy packages. I recognise this is unwelcome news for the Belfast workforce and their families. It is regrettable that they face further uncertainty at this time of year, but Bombardier is a private company and the Government have no role in its commercial decisions. My top priority has been to emphasise our support for Bombardier’s high-quality UK workforce, now and in the future. The Shorts factory in Belfast employs about 4,000 skilled workers, with almost a quarter of those working on the A220, the new joint venture with Airbus. It also supports a supply chain of hundreds of companies and many more jobs in the UK. It is in all our interests that Bombardier’s Belfast facility is successful. Last year, when the joint venture was announced, both Bombardier and Airbus made a number of important commitments to me, including that wing manufacturing will continue in Belfast; that the treatment of UK sites and suppliers will be equal to that of other Bombardier and Airbus suppliers, and that the strategy will be one of building on existing strengths and commitments, not on plant closures, taking those job losses, but I am sure the whole House will be disappointed that the same spirit of co-operation appears not to have been the case here and that Jackie Pollock, the Unite regional secretary, has indicated that the trust and co-operation that was built up last year should have been respected and maintained, particularly when the company reported a 57% rise in its profits only nine months ago.

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The Government will continue to work closely with the company, the unions and the devolved Administration to support the company, and support manufacturing sectors we can be proud of. In Northern Ireland, the Government invested more than £20 million of research and development activity at the Belfast plant to develop new products and improve efficiency. The Government will continue to work closely with the company, the unions and the devolved Administration to support the company, and support manufacturing sectors we can be proud of. In Northern Ireland, the Department for Communities redundancy service offers support to employers, workers and those impacted during a redundancy situation.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I would like to say, “And for advance sight of it”, but, as he will know, that was hardly the case. Indeed, when it was emailed to me less than 25 minutes before the end of business questions, I twisted back to my office to ask whether it did indeed end at that point. I was advised, “Yes, that’s it.” That most certainly is not it. Bombardier’s presence is vital to the economy in Northern Ireland, representing 8% of Northern Ireland’s GDP and about 40% of the Province’s manufacturing output. The company employs 4,000 people across Northern Ireland as a whole, so this announcement will be a devastating blow, and not only to the 490 families who will be directly affected by it in the run-up to Christmas, because this involves an estimated 20,000 indirect jobs throughout the UK supply chains and many of those families may also be affected by the company’s decision. Downsizing its UK operations has significant implications for the whole of the UK and this matter is therefore of national public policy importance. For the Minister to say that the Government have no role here is simply unacceptable.

I visited the plant in Belfast last year when the company was under attack from President Trump in his attempt to impose tariffs of 292% on Bombardier aircraft exported to the US. I spoke to the unions there and I know what a relief it was when those unfair tariffs were not applied as a result of a ruling by the International Trade Commission and Commissioner Meredith Broadbent, whom I also met when I visited Washington to argue Bombardier’s case. I pay tribute to the way in which both Unite and GMB worked with Michael Ryan and Bombardier’s management at that time to fight those job losses, but I am sure the whole House will be disappointed that the same spirit of co-operation appears not to have been the case here and that Jackie Pollock, the Unite regional secretary, has indicated that the unions were not made aware of the extent and scale of the job losses that the management were contemplating. The trust and co-operation that was built up last year should have been respected and maintained, particularly when the company reported a 57% rise in its profits only nine months ago.

The industry is not unused to coping with fluctuations in the workforce. In May 2015, at least 220 jobs were lost. In February 2016, it was announced that about 20% of the Northern Ireland workforce would go, with 580 jobs lost in 2016 and 500 in 2017. In April 2016, those job cuts were revised up from 580 to 630. In September and October 2017, another 375 job cuts were announced. These 490 proposed job losses are just the latest in a long line of redundancies at Bombardier. There have been more than 1,700 since May 2015. Such huge cuts to the workforce, so highly concentrated in one area, will have devastating consequences for entire communities. The company has said that the job cuts are part of a global drive to cut costs, but a disproportionate number of the 5,000 Bombardier jobs to be cut globally are in Northern Ireland, representing more than 10% of the workforce there. Bombardier represents 8% of Northern Ireland’s GDP and 40% of its manufacturing output.

What recent discussions has the Minister had with Bombardier regarding the global restructuring plans? Has he received any suggestion from the company that its restructuring plans have been influenced in any way by Brexit? When will he be travelling to Northern Ireland to meet the unions and the families affected? What discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about securing alternative inward
investment into Northern Ireland? What provision will be put in place for advice and support for the affected families? Has he spoken yet to Invest Northern Ireland and the officials at the Department for the Economy about the future of manufacturing in the Province? Finally, many ordinary people in Northern Ireland wish to know when the Government will make serious efforts to get the Northern Ireland Assembly back up and running so that issues such as these can be properly responded to at a local level.

Richard Harrington: I have a lot of time for the hon. Gentleman, and I have many private conversations with him. I know that he is generally a positive person, so I feel disappointed at the way in which he has talked down Northern Ireland and its economy in his response to the statement. There is a lot of good news coming from Northern Ireland. For example, the recent significant investment by Artemis Technologies has shown that the economy of Northern Ireland is expanding. A lot of the expansion is technology-based around aerospace, and Bombardier—we usually call it Shorts, as that is what it was originally—is very much part of that. We have also had the announcement of the Belfast city deal, which is worth about £350 million, so I do not write off what is happening in Northern Ireland at all.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned tariffs. I have broad shoulders—just as you said you had, Mr Speaker—but I disagree with his implication that the Government did not do a huge amount in dealing with the United States authorities. This was not just a trip to Washington with a press release; we had continual meetings with the State Department, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I have many such discussions, including from a sedentary position today as I am pleased to say that she is sitting beside me on the Front Bench. We discuss Bombardier a lot. The hon. Gentleman also asked what dealings the Government had had with the company, and I can tell him that they are regular and ongoing. Only this week, a team of officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy visited the company. On the question of whether they discussed what was announced yesterday, I can tell him that that was not the case. Clearly, the company has to deal commercially, and it discussed this matter with us—and, I presume, with the trade unions—when it put out its statutory notice yesterday. As soon as I heard about it, I contacted the company, as did my officials. I spoke to Michael Ryan on the phone this morning and I have arranged to meet him in London this afternoon. This is not something that we take lightly, because we know that—as the hon. Gentleman fairly pointed out—the impact in Belfast of anything that happens to Shorts can be very serious.

I am always delighted to see the unions. In fact, I met them on my first visit, when I had just taken over this job, to Bombardier in Belfast. Although they might not agree with me on some things, I hope they would agree that my door is always open to them—not just in respect of Bombardier, but for aerospace generally and for the automotive sector and all the other sectors that I deal with. I have benefited from the knowledge I have got from speaking directly to unions, not only nationally but at plants when I visit them.

I am not in any way implying or insinuating that this is good news—it is not very good news at all—but I accept the fact, and hope the hon. Gentleman does, that Bombardier’s main concern is that it is dealing in a very competitive international market. It has competition coming up in Russia, China and elsewhere and is fighting hard for every contract it gets, so it has to make sure that the company is efficient.

I am pleased that the technology that I saw is absolutely first class and that the Government are part of that work. We have support from the local MPs, and I was delighted to deal regularly with the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), whom I see in his place. I commend him on his work to help with everything that we have done on Bombardier. [Interruption.] Mr Speaker is getting impatient, so I shall sit down.

Mr Speaker: No, no, it is always a pleasure to listen to the Minister’s mellifluous tones, which are equalled only by those of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes).

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Political theorists and practitioners from Benjamin Disraeli to Ernie Bevin understood the relationship between the national interest and the common good, but the Government’s procurement policy, and particularly the policies of their agencies, frequently subsumes both those noble things in all kinds of extraneous qualifications, usually under the title “state aid”. The excellent Minister has said that he will work with Bombardier, and the Government in their industrial strategy have committed £4 billion to the aerospace sector. Will the Minister ensure—perhaps he can tell the House now that he will do so—that the procurement policy of the Government and all their agencies will be amended, reformed and in tune with that support and investment?

Richard Harrington: As ever, my right hon. Friend is right and as erudite as he always is in explaining the significance of the Government’s procurement role. That is also true for many other sectors in which I am involved, including construction. I think my right hon. Friend was asking me whether state aid policies will change in relation to the procurement of Government contracts and so on. I cannot answer that question, because we will have to see what happens in future, but I can say that my Department is regularly in touch with other Departments that are responsible for procurement, to push continually the advantages of Bombardier and many other companies in the supply chain, in all the areas that we deal with.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement.

In the light of the 57% increase in profits announced earlier this year, the announcement of job losses is clearly a real kick in the teeth for the workforce. Our sympathies
obviously go out to the 490 employees and their families. The latest news follows a longer-term pattern, with the 220 jobs lost in 2015, 630 lost in 2016, nearly 400 lost in 2017, and close to 500 lost now. Given that pattern, what discussions have the UK Government had with Bombardier over this period about stemming job losses and about the plant’s long-term future? What money can be made available either to protect these jobs or to help with redeployment? It is not good enough for the Government to say that it is a private company and a commercial decision, because they need to do everything to protect jobs from being lost.

We hear from the Government statistics about record employment and record low unemployment, but such statistics hide serious issues such as this one at Bombardier employment and about the plant’s long-term future? What money can be made available either to protect these jobs or to help with redeployment? It is not good enough for the Government to say that it is a private company and a commercial decision, because they need to do everything to protect jobs from being lost.

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Finally, the Minister’s statement confirms that the UK Government provided £20 million of research and development grants to the plant in Belfast, and this was to be used to bring in efficiency measures. Can he confirm that, when the Government give R&D grants for efficiency measures, they do an impact assessment to see what that means for jobs and that the grants are only for protecting jobs? Any job losses must come with transitional arrangements and plans for workforce redeployment.

Richard Harrington: I will try to answer the hon. Gentleman’s questions as best I can. I was jettisoning them down quickly as he said them.

First, I did say that this is a commercial decision, and it is a commercial decision. The last time I looked, Bombardier was not a nationalised industry, so it is not at all a question of the Government making people redundant. The Government’s support for Bombardier and for aerospace generally is unmatched by any time in history. Bombardier is an important part of the Aerospace Growth Partnership, which I chair jointly with Colin Smith, an industry veteran and former president of Rolls-Royce. We have channelled about £1.95 billion to support R&D, of which Bombardier is the beneficiary.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the £20 million that was announced. This is for a number of projects including a reverse thrust project. [Interruption.] It is a reverse thrust for an engine. I know, Mr Speaker, that you will be personally interested in reverse thrusts. I have learned quite a lot about it and would be delighted to brief you personally on the subject if you require it. The serious point is that the whole of the aerospace industry, particularly in passenger jets, is changing. We must make sure that the Government funds that we have help to change our aerospace industry, which has a turnover of £42 billion, of which £38 billion is exported, and shape the business for the future. I am very pleased about the projects that are going on, and I have visited them with the hon. Member for Belfast East to see what was happening. The project itself—the factory that I visited—was opened by Arlene Foster when she was the Minister responsible for that area, so this is very much a cross-party thing.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the ups and downs of the currency. He is right that it has changed significantly, but businesses such as Bombardier are used to dealing with changes in currencies. It has happened in cycles throughout history, and when companies such as Bombardier—I cannot speak for them, but this is what happens in my experience—get an order, they take hedging positions on the currency so that they do not face currency risk.

The most serious and significant point that the hon. Gentleman made, among the many points—[Interruption.—I will try. There has been a lot of chuntering about me going on too much, Mr Speaker, but the hon. Gentleman made a very important point about industrial strategy. Aerospace is a critical part of it. It is really about place, which is ideal for Bombardier because it is in Northern Ireland. It is about skills. Again, these are very highly skilled and very highly paid jobs, I am pleased to say. It is about channelling the partnership between the Government and the industry to produce a business for the future, and I am certain that Bombardier in Belfast will be part of that.

Mr Speaker: I say to the Minister: my cup runneth over with excitement. Little did I know that service as Speaker entailed a personal briefing on reverse thrust, but one learns something new every day.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If we are in the business of reverse thrusts, may I suggest that a bit of reverse thrusting be done in the direction of Bombardier? Although my hon. Friend the Minister is absolutely right in that it is a private company and he has no power over it, he should not underrate his own degree of influence. He will meet the company, as he says. Let him do a bit of thrusting and let him thrust it in the right direction.

Richard Harrington: Mr Speaker, I think you will soon consider declaring “thrusting” comments completely out of order and unparliamentary language. As you might imagine, the sentiments of what my right hon. Friend says are absolutely right. We are in continual touch with Bombardier. I am proud of the factory; I am proud of the workers there; and I am proud of the Government’s role.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I recognise the Minister’s sincerity on Bombardier and thank him for his continued sincere efforts over the past three years. It would be very easy to consider this as a solely Northern Ireland issue or a localised Belfast issue, but I have been heartened over the past three years that parliamentarians from across the Chamber have recognised its significance to our economy and to high-level engineering, as well as the future benefits associated with Bombardier’s success. The workforce have been through an incredibly difficult time over those three years, and this is a further disheartening blow for a workforce who saw the clouds shifting from above the plant, in Belfast, in Newtownards and in Newtownabbey. Recognising the constraints of private business but knowing the contribution that the Government have made to date, may I ask the Minister to continue to explore every avenue of financial support
and to engage with the Department for International Trade and other Whitehall colleagues to ensure that prospects for future growth, sustainability and security are not only explored but delivered for the workforce in Northern Ireland?

Richard Harrington: I am delighted to be able to give the hon. Gentleman the assurances he asks for. This is critical to my Department, and we hope that Bombardier’s model will be part of our future industrial strategy. The political stability that will, I hope, return to Northern Ireland in a field beyond my remit can only help the future of the workforce there. We work closely with trade unions and politicians of all political parties, and I am pleased to say that the aerospace part of my portfolio is to me the most exciting. I look forward to having more models of wings produced in Belfast on my office desk.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Having spent three of the past 12 years living in Northern Ireland, I know just how important Bombardier is to the economy there and what brilliant aeroplanes they make. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that there is an opportunity to work with Bombardier on the research and development of a new generation of aircraft using hybrid and electric propulsion, so that Bombardier can be in the vanguard of the future aviation industry and so that we can make a positive out of what is undoubtedly a setback today?

Richard Harrington: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Hybrid technology is the nirvana for the future of jet engine propulsion and much of the money we have put in with industry for research and development is for hybrid technology. I am sure that Bombardier will be at the centre of that. This is about not just Bombardier but other companies in Northern Ireland that are in the supply chain. Northern Ireland is a significant hub. At the air shows I visit, the Northern Ireland exhibition stand is prominent and visited by companies from all over the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just a few weeks ago, I visited the Bombardier plant in east Belfast with the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), just to see it. There was no indication at that stage that there would be any job losses, so the announcement of 490 will affect my constituents in Newtownards. Northern Ireland has 10% of the cut to the workforce of 5,000 jobs globally, at a time when the company made a 57% increase in profits in February. The Minister will understand our angst. Will he outline the discussions he has had about investment in the Northern Ireland branches of Bombardier, which reflect the importance the Government have placed on Bombardier and on funding it in Belfast, at Newtownabbey and, in my constituency of Strangford, in Newtownards? Has the Minister had discussions with Bombardier about its intentions to bring back from Mexico and Morocco the work on parts that were once made successfully in Belfast to reflect the high level of investment the Government have made?

Richard Harrington: I commend the hon. Gentleman—I know Newtownards is part of his constituency—as well as the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) for their work and the support they have given to the aerospace industry in their constituencies. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentions the parts that are being made in Mexico, and I was not aware of that but will bring it up at my meeting this afternoon and at every contact between my Department and the management.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure that all parts of the country can benefit from the industrial strategy? What support is being given to Northern Ireland, in particular, as part of this?

Richard Harrington: I can answer my hon. Friend’s question in two ways. On the aerospace sector, I have already explained how much money has been committed—about £1.8 billion in total—but Northern Ireland is also a very important part of this because it is one of our most important aerospace clusters. As regards Northern Ireland itself, I would particularly point to the recently announced Belfast city deal, which involves investment, again on a partnership basis, of about £350 million, of which aerospace will be a significant beneficiary—not just big companies but many small companies are involved. There is also the multiplier effect of those companies for the economy of Northern Ireland.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Not one single constituency is not impacted by this. The supply chain in terms of engineering and advanced engineering in Northern Ireland relies on Bombardier. To put this into perspective for Members in this part of our nation, this would be the equivalent of the Minister standing at the Dispatch Box and announcing more than 15,000 redundancies. That is the sobering reality of what we are facing. Will the Minister speak to the Northern Ireland Administration with regard to the monitoring round and release some of that money into the manufacturing side of business, and will he have an impact assessment carried out with regard to the supply chain in Northern Ireland?

Richard Harrington: The real answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question is that we really do need devolved government enabled to distribute this money with the specific targeting that he refers to. Generally speaking, our policy is very much to support the supply chain. Obviously, manufacturing is very much part of that because it is where the high-quality, skilled jobs that are part of our industrial strategy come from. I will absolutely make sure that that is the case. I will do my best, in my dealings not just with Bombardier but with many of the other companies involved, to reflect the admirable sentiments that he has expressed.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I understand that the aerospace industry supports over 200,000 jobs across the whole UK. What more can the Government do to help us increase our share of the global market?

Richard Harrington: As I said, the aerospace growth partnership that I jointly chair is responsible for precisely what my hon. Friend asks for—the development of the industry in a high-tech manner using the skills in research and development that we have. We are very supportive of the industry, because apart from the high-level
employment, the exports are very significant. As I say, out of £42 billion in turnover, the industry has £38 billion of exports, so it is absolutely critical to us.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), I was appalled by the Minister’s statement that as Bombardier is a private company the Government have no role in its commercial decisions—the “not me, guv” approach to government. It mirrors the blinkered approach of the Ministry of Defence, which has been shovelling contracts towards Boeing, often without competition, while Boeing is trying to crash Bombardier. What sort of message does the Minister think that that sends? Is it really too much to hope for a whole-of-government, active approach to back an industrial strategy, and back British industry and British workers?

Richard Harrington: I rarely disagree with the right hon. Gentleman, but I must remind him that what I said about this being a commercial decision is a question of fact. It is not subjective; it is not a value judgment. This is a private, independent company that is quoted on the Canadian stock exchange. He is very well aware of that, being very experienced. [Interruption.] The Government can influence it, as I heard in a typically erudite chunter from the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson). We influence it by the investment we put into research and development, as he quite correctly said. That is very important. I know from my discussions with Bombardier management centrally that they do regard Northern Ireland as a central part of their developments in future. As I said in my statement, the company gave us various undertakings. The future of the plant in Northern Ireland—in Belfast—is absolutely critical to them.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Bombardier employs many people across many constituencies in Northern Ireland, and I know that those employees and their families will be deeply worried today. In trying to support them and in the absence of devolved government in Northern Ireland, how will the Department work with others, including the likes of Invest Northern Ireland, to ensure for those employees a quick transition into good jobs elsewhere?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Lady cares deeply for her constituents, and so do I. On the intricacies of devolved government in Northern Ireland, the relevance to my Department is that it makes it more difficult for us to communicate. We have to communicate directly with companies, which is a pleasure, but it is important that we ensure a democratic element to the process as well. We do all we can, however, and have to make the best of the situation. There is certainly no lack of effort or will from my Department. We want more skilled jobs in Northern Ireland, and Bombardier is very much a part of that, so we are not writing the company off because of these redundancies, although I accept that they are significant and a serious issue for her constituents.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): More than 30% of the Bombardier workforce has been cut since 2015. In my experience working with Scottish Enterprise, first-tier aerospace companies, particularly Bombardier, have quite a shallow penetration into second and third-tier supply chain companies in the UK. Will the Minister redouble his efforts and ensure a proper industrial strategy that maximises the inputs from first-tier companies such as Bombardier into second and third-tier companies so that we can mop up some of the jobs that have been lost?

Richard Harrington: I cannot speak for the hon. Gentleman’s experience in his constituency, but it is my impression, from my dealings with Bombardier and other companies in the Northern Ireland cluster, that they are well integrated and co-ordinated with each other. He asks me to redouble my efforts, however, and I certainly will do. I will bear in mind his point in every visit I make and every conversation I have.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Ld/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is a decent man sent to the House to do a dirty job. I say in the nicest way that he should not try to bamboozle the House. Michael Ryan is a good chief executive—and, indeed, he is a “Make it in Great Britain” industry champion for the Government—and Bombardier is a damned good company. We know it. I have just been to Northern Ireland, and I know how proud Northern Ireland is of it, but the reality is that it is an integrated global business, and the disturbance created by our leaving the EU is having a deep effect, including on Airbus and supply chains. Michael Ryan and his team are very unsettled by what the Government are doing in coming out of Europe and upsetting the supply chains. Behind all this is our leaving Europe. The Minister should take that on board.

Richard Harrington: I hope you would agree, Mr Speaker, that I am not a bamboozler by nature, and it is certainly not my intention to bamboozle the House or the hon. Gentleman. On the serious point, the company has said this is not a Brexit-related decision.

Mr Sheerman: It would do.

Richard Harrington: It has said that very clearly. As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, aerospace is a truly international business and frictionless trade is an important part of it, and I believe that the deal the Prime Minister has been negotiating, which will provide for frictionless trade to help manufacturing industry in the future, will help Bombardier and all other companies remain strong. The Irish trade unions have issued a statement urging the deal to happen.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have worked in the aerospace industry, so I have a rough idea of what is happening. It was mentioned that direct jobs are being affected, but hon. Members have mentioned the supply chain. In my experience, for every direct job lost, three indirect jobs could be lost. Can the Minister give us the actual figures and set out the impact on the supply chain?

Richard Harrington: I think the hon. Gentleman is correct about the multiplier effect. I cannot say exactly, but it is about three to four indirect jobs for every one direct job.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I visited Bombardier last month, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), in a visit
organised and paid for by the Industry and Parliament Trust. Bombardier is making fantastic products. The danger is that these cuts upon cuts will lead to the loss of the critical mass of skills, meaning that the next set of products cannot be made there. Does the Minister share that concern, and if so, what is he doing to protect skills?

**Richard Harrington:** I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern, which is common to industry generally, including steel and other sectors. The Northern Ireland aerospace hub is very solid. Although orders will not come through until 2020, the deal that Bombardier did with Airbus means that the company can plan for the future, and it is very aware of the need to maintain skills.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): One area where Government can help is retraining. Will the Minister consider an endowment or individual learning account for workers who have been made redundant, to enable them to get training and secure positions elsewhere?

**Richard Harrington:** That is very interesting. I believe that it is a devolved matter, but I will look into it with interest.

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**Points of Order**

12.10 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Have you had any representations from a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to make a statement to the House on the case of Matthew Hedges? Many Members will be concerned that a British citizen has been given a life sentence—possibly tortured in the process—and yet we have not had a statement from Government. Can you tell me how I can ensure that a Minister comes to the House as soon as possible to update us on that case?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The issue is very much in the public square, as he will know, and is the subject of much angst and horrified discussion among not merely parliamentarians but, I rather imagine, a very large number of people across the country who feel for Mr Hedges. I think I can predict with complete confidence that this matter will be aired in the Chamber next week, whether by the offer of a ministerial statement or by other means with which the right hon. Gentleman is closely familiar. It is unimaginable that next week will pass without this very significant humanitarian and foreign relations issue being fully discussed by Members.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for your response to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake). It is important for the family to know over this weekend that Ministers are working as hard as they can to ensure this man’s freedom and are calling for his so-called punishment to be deferred and for him to be sent back to the United Kingdom. I think of the family—I always do—over this weekend. The Department should be contacting them.

**Mr Speaker:** I know that Ministers will be having contact, and I think the fact of the Foreign Secretary’s contact with Mr Hedges’s wife is a matter of public record. The House will be sitting tomorrow, and as things stand, the Prime Minister will be here later today. Admittedly she is not here for that purpose, but the Chair may exercise a modicum of discretion as appropriate for brief reference to be made to this issue, although that is not the principal business. One way or the other, I rather imagine the issue will indeed be aired in the Chamber if Members want it to be before the weekend, and assuredly next week. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.
Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend touches on the essence of the covenant, which I will come to. He also underlines the myths that are perpetuated out there. As the cohort of our society has less and less direct contact with the armed forces, these myths can be perpetuated. It is up to those in the armed forces, as well as Government and Parliament, to ensure that those myths are not perpetuated.

Someone who joins the armed forces will come out a better person; they will learn more about themselves, go to places they did not even know existed and serve their nation with pride. Some 90% of those who serve leave the armed forces either in education or with a job. However, the underlying point must be made that many, through no fault of their own, require support, and we ensure that support is provided.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What are the Government doing to assist the families of ex-soldiers who have mental health problems? That is a very important factor, because it can lead to family break-ups and all sorts of problems. Can the Minister give us an assurance about that? I also remind him that it was a Labour Government who started the covenant.

Mr Ellwood: Support for mental health—or what I prefer to call mental fitness—is critical to what the covenant espouses. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise that. If I may, I will venture further into my address, but he is welcome to intervene at a later stage.

I was touching on the reforms that we have seen since the first world war. There have been many key moments in the history of our nation when we bettered the service conditions for our armed forces. The major ones came in 1868 with the Cardwell reforms, which removed the use of flogging, abolished the sale of officers’ commissions and set the length of service for how long people would remain in uniform. In 1880, the Childers reforms established the regimental system that we recognise today and the standardisation of uniform. There was a feeling that wearing a red tunic on the battlefield was not such a great idea, and something a little bit greener might be better if we did not want the enemy to see us—something that my regiment, the Royal Green Jackets, picked up quite quickly, hence the name. From 1906, the Haldane reforms brought in the lessons from the Boer war, but also created the British Expeditionary Force—the first force to set foot in France and provide our initial response in world war one.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister also recognise that the 1906 Haldane reforms created the Territorial Force, which has of course been an instrumental part of Britain’s military capability since that time?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not know what we would have done without the Territorial Force, and he is absolutely right that the introduction of the reserves as such, and of a standing Army, was something Haldane was very important in doing, and we are ever grateful to him for that.

To go back to what happened in the aftermath of world war one, it was the warriors returning from the continent who exposed the shortfall in support for our veterans. That shortfall in support prompted the creation of many of the charities we recognise today, such as...
[Mr Ellwood]

Combat Stress and Blesma, as well as the Royal British Legion, which led to the poppy appeal that does so much to support our veterans.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The Minister mentions the poppy in passing, but does he share my distaste about some of the remarks made in the far-left media during the Remembrance period? Such people of course have the right not to wear the poppy and even to object to it, but I rather thought that speaking out so negatively about the work of the Royal British Legion was beyond the pale. I hope the Minister agrees.

Mr Ellwood: I think my hon. Friend speaks for the whole House in supporting the poppy and the work of the campaign, which is absolutely terrific in providing support for our veterans. I would hate to see anybody choose to make political gain out of the poppy. It is important to reflect on what the campaign has achieved, and I hope that that will continue.

The nation owes a debt of gratitude to service personnel and their families for what they do for this country, and that is what the covenant is all about. It is about how we apply that in practical terms. Today, under section 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2011, we publish our seventh armed forces covenant annual report. In simple terms, the covenant is about the contract that we must have with those who serve and those who have served. In setting the scene for the debate, I will, if I may, read out its opening lines:

“The first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. Our Armed Forces fulfil that responsibility on behalf of the Government, sacrificing some civilian freedoms, facing danger and, sometimes, suffering serious injury or death as a result of their duty. Families also play a vital role in supporting the operational effectiveness of our Armed Forces. In return, the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families.

They deserve our respect and support, and fair treatment.

Those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, those who have served in the past, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved.

This obligation involves the whole of society: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant.”

This is what the covenant is about: it is our duty to those who serve and have served.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I have looked at the document very carefully, and I can find nothing in it about the veterans, particularly Northern Ireland veterans, who are now being arrested for historical offences that took place many years ago. Many such veterans have been arrested already and about 300 more are facing the prospect of a dawn raid. This is completely against natural justice, it is against the covenant and these brave veterans deserve the full support of my right hon. Friend’s Department.

Mr Ellwood: May I pay tribute to the work my hon. Friend is doing along with other Back Benchers on this particular and important issue? He is absolutely right that that is not included in the report on the covenant because, quite separately, it is being studied by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I know that he is contributing to that debate as well. A consultation on this has been opened. He will be aware that this is tied in with the Belfast agreement. He knows my own personal views on this. As we move forward, we need to clarify this and be in a position whereby those who serve this country do not feel that questions will be asked about them 30, 40 or 50 years later.

Dr Murrison: The Minister has laid out the contract contained in the military covenant, but does he agree with me that people are rejecting the offer on a truly industrial scale? That is why we have a big problem with recruitment and retention. It is no good eulogising the covenant and the offer to members of our armed forces if they pass a vote of no confidence—that is essentially what they have done—in what is on offer.

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a former naval officer. I would correct him about where the trends in recruitment are going: we have new processes in place. He will be aware of how competitive the current environment actually is. The challenge actually lies in retention. We need to be able to provide an atmosphere that encourages people, as their circumstances change—as they get married, as they have children—to remain in the thing they love: the armed forces themselves. I will come on to some of the changes being introduced specifically with that in mind to make sure that we can retain the people with the skillsets we need.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman read out the opening remarks of the covenant. I am sure he will agree that a lot of the responsibilities for the covenant rest with local authorities. With funding settlements from the Ministry of Defence coming for only two-year periods, does he not agree that there is a need for more certainty in implementing the covenant? If authorities are given funding beyond the two-year funding formula, we could put in place long-term plans for supporting veterans and, indeed, bereaved families.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman touches on something that is so critical to the armed forces covenant. It is not just the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence to execute it, but the duty of different Departments right across Whitehall. If they do not live up to their charge, it is often the MOD that gets to know about it. It is so important that the covenant has the practical ability to hold to account other Departments and, as he mentions, local authorities. That is one area in which we need to get better. I put my hand up to say that it is not as good or as equal across Britain—there are different standards depending on where people are—and that absolutely needs to improve.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): On that particular point, will my right hon. Friend confirm how many local authorities are not signed up to the covenant? I know that my local authority, Powys, certainly is, and I am delighted that it is. Does he have any figures, and what more can he do to ensure that other local authorities sign up to it?
Mr Ellwood: I am pleased to say that all local authorities are signed up, but signing up to something is not the same as implementing it. That is where we need to improve what we do by holding the local authorities to account. As I look around the Chamber, I see Members representing different parts of Britain. Some of our constituencies have an historical connection with the armed forces, and those local authorities tend to be far better at implementing the practical application of the covenant than those with less of a connection. That is what we need to change, and where the covenant must come in with a bit more venom and a bit more severity if we are to hold such local authorities to account.

James Heappey: Almost all public bodies—all local authorities and many clinical commissioning groups and schools—are signed up, but does my right hon. Friend agree with me that an area that causes the families of serving military personnel great frustration is when utility companies are difficult about allowing them to break contracts midway through because they have a change of posting or their circumstances change as a consequence of their duty? Does he agree that there is actually a great deal of work to be done among those in the private sector to persuade them to recognise the challenges of military life and to adapt their terms of service to accommodate such personnel?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend mentions two issues, on which I share his concern. On clinical commissioning groups, I am aware that, when service personnel are transferred from one locality to another, they do not necessarily gain the same access to medication for their children, which they need. It is very serious if children move to a new location and cannot get their medication and that must change—we must address that issue. He also mentioned businesses. The big and small businesses with which we are working and which have signed up to the covenant are providing flexibility on contracts. For example, those who are mobilised to go to Afghanistan are allowed to cancel their mobile phone contract without fear of penalty because those companies have signed up to the covenant. Those are practical examples of how businesses can provide support and not penalise people because of their service.

I touched on some of the changes that have been introduced in the past few years of which we can be proud. First, part of the support provided for charities is the introduction of the gateway—the single portal that allows any veteran, and their families, to identify where support might be found in myriad areas, be that housing, homelessness, writing a CV or employment. The veterans’ gateway provides a single access portal so that myriad charities that can help can be identified in a much simpler way than in the past, when perhaps it was a bit confusing to know which way to turn.

The second change—this is very much thanks to the Defence Secretary—is the launch of the 24/7 helpline for serving personnel and veterans. It is critical that people know where they can turn to for help, no matter what time it is, day or night, and no matter the situation.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I do not want to talk figures, but from my experience a worrying number of veterans take their own life, and I wonder what help is available for those who feel suicidal, for whatever reason. It is critical that we help people in their most urgent moment of need.

Mr Ellwood: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have introduced the Samaritans handbook to provide the necessary support for all serving personnel and that is being rolled out to veterans. I am concerned about this issue, which has taken a higher profile in social media and elsewhere. Whether it is perceived or otherwise, it is important that we do not shy away from our responsibility to help those veterans who may feel that they have gone into a very dark place. I touched on the 24/7 helpline, but there is also the cross-Whitehall veterans board that allows us to hold to account other Departments that need to upgrade their support for veterans and their families, as well as the armed forces. It is still in its infancy, and it still needs to get stronger and sharper in holding other Departments to account—I am sure we will debate that further this afternoon. However, I am pleased that the board is in place, and doing good work to encourage and wake up other Departments to their direct responsibilities, which are separate from those of the Ministry of Defence.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Minister has just made an important point, and it is important that he recognises the infancy of the process. Is he seized of the inadequacy of the Northern Ireland Office representing Northern Ireland Departments, including Health and Housing, for which they have no operational responsibility or indeed knowledge?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I was in Northern Ireland for Remembrance Sunday and it was a pleasure to be back. He knows that I served there a number of years ago, and it was a pleasure to see how far advanced the whole of Northern Ireland is in embracing the ability publicly to thank the armed forces. I was in Coleraine for Armed Forces Day, but at the time that I served we would never have seen our armed forces marching down the streets with people thanking them for their service. There are, however, some particular challenges in Northern Ireland, of which the hon. Gentleman is more aware than me. He is also aware of the situation with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the development of the new districts that are coming in. It is a bottom-up approach. We are trying to make this work. There is the veterans’ support office, which he is familiar with. I have met people from that office, too. Anyone who feels that they are not receiving support needs to get directly in touch with that office because that is the avenue through which to find help. Help is there, but as with many situations, this is about knowing where to go when such help is required.

The other major change is the mental health strategy, and the significance of that issue has already been touched on a number of times. This is about what we put our brave personnel through, and whether there is a requirement for them to have additional support in that area. In my time—I am looking around the Chamber and there are many old warriors here—

James Heappey: Speak for yourself!

Mr Ellwood: Well let’s go out and do a basic fitness test and see how we get on. My point is that, in our time, would we have been willing to put our hand up and say that we had an issue with our mind? If we had a physical injury, absolutely, we would have stepped forward—we would not have had a problem with that—but there was perhaps a stigma associated with being honest.
about any mental troubles we might have had. That was the entirely wrong approach, because those issues can then incubate and become worse, and then someone ends up departing the very thing they love because they find it difficult to cope. That has a knock-on impact because, when somebody loses confidence in themselves, that affects their career possibilities, they may depart the armed forces and it may affect their relationships and lead to family break-up or unemployment, which could spiral into a very dark chapter.

Let us go back to the beginning. If someone is able and encouraged, and does not feel that it will threaten their ambitions in the armed forces, they should be able to put their hand up and say “Actually, I have a bit of an issue. Can someone help to sort it out?” Someone might say to them, “Why don’t you go and see the doctor and get yourself checked out? It’s okay.” That is the place we are now going towards. Every ship’s captain, platoon commander, squadron leader and person now has a responsibility—a duty—to look after one another and ensure that if there is an issue we talk about it straightforwardly. It is okay for someone to say that they are not okay.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister is making a positive effort to outline the vision we ought to have, which I think everyone shares. Does he also recognise that four in 10 service families who have requested access to and been referred for mental health care have had difficulty accessing that treatment? That is not good enough and we need to do more. Many of our veterans experience great frustration when it comes to mental health support, and that leads to the despair that we have seen, with a spate of veteran suicides.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I will come on to the details of mental health and wellbeing, and say what more we are doing. More funds have come through from the recent Budget, but we need to ensure that treatment is available and that veterans know where to find it.

James Heappey: My right hon. Friend is right. Over the three tours that I did, in 2005, 2007 and 2009, the difference in attitude to mental health, and the reactions within theatre to things that were happening, grew exponentially. The key is to ensure that the lessons learned when mental health was a necessity in combat become business as usual for regiments, ships and squadrons going forward. I hope that since I left the military in 2012 that has become the norm, and that it is business as usual for mental health always to be a topic of conversation, rather than just in connection with operations.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The whole aspect of decompression is new, too. When our armed forces come back from a combat arena, they are moved into a different environment before they see their family. They are checked and discussions are had to check their temperament. We now get back in touch with family. They are checked and discussions are had to move into a different environment before they see their armed forces come back from a combat arena, they are aware of what to anticipate, so that they are appreciative of environments where they may be affected by mental health issues. The third is detection, understanding and finding out what is going on, through discussions and better checks of what individuals are going through. Fourthly, if you can detect it, you can treat it early and get those people back into the frontline, where they want to be, as quickly as possible. We do not want to wait. We do not want any individuals to allow these issues to incubate or for them to live in denial of a problem.

There is one spectrum of veterans about whom I am particularly concerned. We are seeing the benefits of the processes we put in place following the lessons we learned from Afghanistan and Iraq. The groupings who are more vulnerable, because the stigma was so prevalent, are those who served at the time of the Falklands.
They are now in their 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s. They saw and experienced things that perhaps they still do not want to talk about. They were not educated during their time about where help could be found. It is those people whom we have a duty to reach out to and find through means other than our connections to the armed forces.

Our new approach begins at the start of any individual’s career, through promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, preventing and detecting the onset of mental illness at the earliest possibility, and treating such illnesses when they are diagnosed. I touched on the additional funds that are coming from the Budget. An extra £2 million a year is being brought in to improve mental health services for our armed forces, on top of the £20 million already committed.

As hon. Members will be aware, this is another great example of where responsibility lies not just with the Ministry of Defence. We are often compared with the United States, which has a completely different approach to this, but we have the NHS, which is the best in the world. It would not make sense to replicate that with another health service simply for our armed forces. We need to tap into and take advantage of the NHS skill sets. If people go to the NHS and it denies them support, the machine is not working and we need to ensure that that changes. It is therefore important that the MOD has a close relationship with NHS England and indeed the devolved Administrations to make sure it works right across the country and meets the healthcare needs of the armed forces community.

Healthcare in England is devolved to local clinical commissioning groups. I have touched on the issues that we have with different standards and approaches; that needs to be reconciled. Most services for all demographics, however, are commissioned and provided locally. Healthcare for devolved Administrations is devolved to those Administrations for more regional and local determination of services and is consistent with national approaches to healthcare. In England, local CCGs, working with local authorities, have the legal responsibility for planning and commissioning, and for providing appropriate health and social care for the population where they live. Those requirements and needs are measured through the respective local authority–chaired health and wellbeing boards and underpinned by the latest data on where the armed forces communities live. That is absolutely critical because, if they move from one locality to another, they do not want to be waiting for their records to catch up with them to gain the necessary treatment they deserve.

**Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con):** On local authorities, will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Aberdeen City Council, which has just renewed its commitment to the armed forces covenant by signing a new one? This covenant will show the city’s appreciation for the work of our armed forces and veterans. It puts in place additional support to help veterans into employment; to help them and their families; and to give more new council housing to those who have served in our armed forces. Does my right hon. Friend think that that is a leading initiative that other councils should perhaps follow?

**Mr Ellwood:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right. He highlights the fact that there is different modelling around the country.

He also touches on something that perhaps I can praise him for: he has bothered to understand what is going on in his patch. I hope that we all can be bothered to do that. All hon. Members should take an interest, because of the varying standards around the country, to go in and ask those questions. We have a role to play in upgrading the standards and maybe copying what is happening in his local authority.

To turn back to NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care, we have written, at national director and permanent secretary levels, to the chairs of all the health and wellbeing boards, reminding them of the need to update their strategic needs and assessments, and to use the latest annual population survey data, which reflects where the armed forces are based. The Local Government Association, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care, collects data on all local authorities that have signed the armed forces covenant. It is critical that they do their duty as well. Based on ongoing use of nationally commissioned services, as well as evidence-based research, NHS England’s transition, intervention and liaison complex mental health treatment services are continually reviewed to ensure that both capacity and capability are in place and services are reconfigured to meet both clinical demand and changes to professional practice—that relates to the point the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) raised earlier.

The mental health complex treatment service was launched in April. It caters to the individual treatment needs of veterans at community level. This is where we need to ensure that veterans are aware of what support is available. This follows on from the introduction of the transition intervention and liaison services last year, completing the tiered approach to veterans’ mental healthcare.

In addition, there is the Veterans Trauma Network, which collects data, numbers, location and intervention types on all patients who access the service. The VTN steering group is working with the veteran patient cohort and researchers to look at the societal impacts of their injuries and interventions to inform planning and delivery reviews of the service. It is complicated to go into the weeds of the support. Sometimes people might get the impression that little is being done, but support is available, and it is so important that veterans are made aware of where that support is.

Turning to local government, I have touched on the role of the armed forces champion. Again, I encourage every single Member here to go to their local authority and ask, “Who is the armed forces champion?” Find out their name and whether their name is on the local authority’s website. Find out what they do. Are they making sure that every single guideline and rule that the council puts forward is through the prism of understanding what impact it will have on our armed forces and our armed forces community? If there is a homeless issue, what is being done, for example, to make sure that the local authority is providing for the vets who may be homeless? Typically, that is the sort of work that the armed forces champion should focus on. The more that we as Members of Parliament ask these questions, the better we will raise the bar overall.

From a housing perspective, I am pleased that earlier this year, the MOD signed a duty—a statutory requirement—with the new Ministry of Housing,
Communities and Local Government to refer individuals leaving the military to local authorities, if they are deemed by their local commanding officer to be at risk of homelessness. That is so important. It means that we should not see people who might end up becoming homeless leaving the armed forces with nowhere to go, because their plight will be flagged up as they depart.

On education, it is important to understand again that not just the armed forces, but their families, are affected by moving. If individual personnel are moved from one locality to another and they have children, this will of course have an impact on schooling and other aspects of education. This is disruptive. Any child can end up moving three or four times during their schooling, and that is not good for their education. We cannot have a situation whereby people move to a new locality and find that they do not get their school of choice. In some cases, I found, horrifically, that when special needs school support is required, individual personnel are not being given that support, and this must change.

We are providing research to understand the impact of mobility on the progression of service children. We are also looking at service children's progression from an alliance practitioner hub perspective to bring together local partners, including schools, colleges, universities, local authorities and charities, to address the specific needs of service children in a local context. In March 2018, the alliance carried out a UK-wide consultation that identified strong common themes. These will help to improve the evidence base to inform the development of our policy, so that we make sure that we can answer these challenging questions of how we disrupt less and less the lives of children seeking education.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend's position on the boarding school allowance for service children? That benefits not just officers, but non-commissioned officers and soldiers, who tend to use it increasingly frequently.

Mr Ellwood: All these questions get raised regularly with the Treasury. I know in my time how important this was—I am sure it was in my hon. Friend's as well—and how important it continues to be as the basis for providing a single locality for individuals, particularly when NCOs and others are deployed abroad, because it provides the stability that they need. I will write to him in more detail, but we continue to debate this regularly with the Treasury. It is something that we recognise absolutely, and I am personally committed to making sure that it continues.

On funding for childcare, I am pleased to say that we have allocated £20 million in the Budget for facilities for service families in 40 locations around the country, and Cyprus is included as well. The English admissions code continues to recognise the mobility of service children and has provisions for them to apply for school places before they move into an area. I add that some individual personnel only have up to four months' notice of when they move. That is shorter than the period that schools require, so I ask the Department for Education to recognise the unique circumstances that our armed forces face. They do not always have the luxury of giving extended notice of when they might move into an area, and therefore we need to say that these children must not be disadvantaged. Sometimes, they will receive only four months' notice and the school admission authorities must be aware of the difficulties that they face.

In the financial year 2018-19, nearly £23 million will be allocated to state schools in England through the service pupil premium to benefit over 76,000 current and former service children in over 10,000 primary and secondary schools. I am pleased that the Secretary of State for Defence announced the extension of the education support fund in July 2018. That will be on a limited basis and will consist of £3 million in 2018-19 and £2 million in 2019-20. The educational support fund is open to publicly funded schools, academies and free schools in the UK that are attended by service children whose parents are subject to exceptional mobility or deployment. Applications for local authorities in support of these schools can be accepted.

I know that the area of suicides and post-traumatic stress disorder is of concern to many in the House. Any suicide is a tragedy, especially when it is someone who has served our country. However, I make it clear—I know that this is a sensitive issue—that suicide does not occur in isolation. It is usually the most tragic symptom of many other issues, such as mental health issues, family breakdown, debt, unemployment or myriad other problems. It is inaccurate and, indeed, disrespectful and trivialising to link it solely with military service, but I will say that in some cases, military service plays a role, and we need to better understand the causes so that we can act to prevent further potential suicides in future.

We have set up a new suicide prevention working group to urgently look at cases involving such distress in service personnel. It will look at how to address the issues affecting those in such distress now and how to prevent others from feeling the same way. It will look at the triggers in service to ensure that all future veterans have the resilience that they need while serving and after they leave. For existing veterans, we now have, as hon. Members will be aware, a Minister responsible for suicide prevention—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—who was appointed in October. She is also a member of the ministerial covenant and veterans board and is responsible for addressing this issue.

The Department of Health and Social Care has had a national suicide prevention strategy in place since 2012 that aims to address the causes of suicide for every civilian, not just veterans. However, veterans are identified in the strategy as requiring tailored approaches to meet their mental health needs. This has resulted in NHS England's veterans' mental health transition, intervention and liaison service, which has supported hundreds of veterans and their families since its launch in April 2017. This is complemented by the veterans' mental health complex treatment service that I mentioned, which was launched in April this year to support those with the most complex needs and provide holistic support for the whole person and their family.

This very difficult area is something that I have shared with the “Five Eyes” nations. I brought together veterans Ministers from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the UK to compare what we are doing better to improve our support for our service
personnel and veterans. We still do not understand this in detail; we still do not understand what drives someone into that dark place. Indeed, in many cases—up to 50%—there is no indication whatsoever that people would actually take their own lives. That is exactly what happened in my own family circumstance: there was no indication that my uncle was going to take his life. It is indeed a complicated scenario for us to address. We must better understand what is going on. We must make sure that we improve our support for veterans, and we must make clear where that help lies.

I have touched on some of the key areas, but let me also highlight the tables at the back of the annual report, on page 118, which give the coding on how well—or not—we are doing.

This is a moving debate. It represents a graduation in our attempts to improve our support for our armed forces and for our veterans as well. When we look at what has happened in the past and the support that was there, I think we can be proud of the direction in which we are going, but I will be the first to say that there is much more to do. Of course, the more we can secure funds—as we do, and we are bidding for more in the next spending review—the more that helps, but if we want to inspire the next generation to think about putting on the uniform, we must ensure that we look after this generation who serve and the last generation who are now retired. The covenant is doing its work, but it must do more.

I look forward to the debate that we are about to have, and I look forward to responding to the issues and concerns that Members will raise. I commend the publication of the seventh armed forces covenant annual report, pursuant to section 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2011.

1.1 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The armed forces covenant represents the solemn and enduring commitment that we owe to members of the armed forces community. Those who serve our country make so many sacrifices in defence of the UK and our interests, and they rightly deserve respect, support and fair treatment both during and after their service, along with their families at home.

The sacrifice made by our servicemen and women has of course been at the forefront of our minds recently, with the Remembrance commemorations and the centenary of the armistice. However, the covenant reminds us that the debt that we owe to the armed forces community is not for a particular day or week, but runs the whole year round. Labour Members fully support the covenant and the important guarantees that underlie it, and we supported its becoming law in 2011; but, of course, simply writing it into a statute is not enough. What matters is whether it is making a difference on the ground. Are our veterans actually receiving that special care? Do the children of personnel really experience no disadvantage when it comes to their schooling? On that count, a lot more needs to be done, and I want to touch on some of that this afternoon.

Let me begin with healthcare. I welcome some of the steps that have been taken in recent years to try to improve awareness of what the covenant requires of health professionals. The Welsh Government recently issued guidance to all health boards on veterans’ priority healthcare, and knowledge of the covenant now forms part of the membership exam for the Royal College of General Practitioners. However, the Royal British Legion has expressed concern about a lack of awareness and understanding of the policy of priority treatment, as well as an inability to measure implementation and a lack of clarity about the Government’s interpretation of the policy, and the Defence Committee has noted confusion over how the principle of priority treatment should be implemented among both clinicians and veterans. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us what more is being done to improve understanding of this important guarantee.

When it comes to mental health, the picture for personnel, veterans and families is worrying. The latest families continuous attitude survey has found that four in 20 of the families who sought mental health treatment experienced difficulties or were unable to access treatment, and we know that that is sadly true among the population at large. Our mental health services have never been under more pressure. Funding for mental health services in England has been cut by over 8% since 2010, and the number of mental health nurses has fallen by 6,600. The Defence Committee has also found that “it is still taking too long for veterans to access treatment when they need it”.

As was mentioned during last week’s debate on the veterans strategy, it is important to be clear that rates of mental illness among personnel and veterans are generally no higher than those among the population at large. However, support must be available to those who need it, and it must be delivered quickly and effectively.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Local authorities are key to this topic, as they are responsible for housing and social services. Does my hon. Friend agree that they must be 100% behind it in the future, so that our servicemen and women are given the best possible support?

Nia Griffith: I absolutely agree that we want the full support of all our local authorities, and our health boards, but I must put on record again that they have experienced very severe cuts under this Government. That is an issue, particularly when we are trying to develop new initiatives and make progress.

We know that the requirements of service life do not just affect personnel. They can also have an impact on families, including children. We do not always recognise just how difficult and stressful being the spouse or partner of a member of the armed forces can be, given the loneliness, the upheaval of moving house frequently and trying to get the children settled, and so on. I congratulate the women behind Forces Wives Challenge, whom I met yesterday and who are raising awareness of the problems. Early next year, some of them are going to Chile to climb the highest volcano in the world, Ojos del Salado. Just as important, however, is the fact that they are working with partners and wives across the country using challenges—in their words, “enabling ordinary women to do extraordinary things”—to bring women together, foster a sense of community, and help women to deal with issues such as loneliness.

One particular challenge arises when service families have to move, which can have a knock-on effect on schooling. I welcome the changes in the common transfer...
file—for instance, the inclusion of more contextual information. That should ultimately help children with the process of moving schools, but it is clear that some issues remain. In its comments on this year’s covenant report, the families federations identify a “distinct spike” in the number of school admissions issues raised with them over the past year, and say that recent surveys show that “finding school places is a key source of anxiety for Service families.”

Some local authorities are clearly taking a proactive approach to dealing with the problem. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf council employs a dedicated forces education officer, who is himself a former soldier and a serving reservist, to work closely with forces families and schools to ensure that the children of personnel are properly supported.

Of course, as the families federations themselves point out, schools continue to be challenged by funding constraints—despite the Chancellor’s promise of cash to cover “little extras”—but I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us what work his Department is doing now to ensure further improvements in time for next year’s report.

We know that the quality of housing for personnel and their families is a matter of real concern. Members will be familiar with the appalling service provided by the contractor Carillion/Amy. Many of us have heard at first hand from personnel and families about unacceptable delays to repairs and the poor quality of maintenance. I myself have met representatives of Amy, which has taken over the contract following the collapse of Carillion earlier this year. They assured me—as, no doubt, they have assured the Minister—that they are working hard to improve the service because they recognise that things have simply not been working well enough, but the fact is that there is a very long way to go. The latest families continuous attitude survey found that barely a third of families are satisfied with the response to requests for maintenance and repair work.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the use of the private sector that has created this crisis in the maintenance of armed forces housing?

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is the issue of privatising services, but there is also a need to watch what those contractors are doing and keep an eye on whether the service providers are actually providing the service. That is the challenge to the Minister; this is a real issue in the defence sector at the moment. Unfortunately, only three in 10 families are satisfied with the quality of that work, which is the lowest level for at least eight years.

However, the use of a private contractor to deliver maintenance services cannot absolve the Government of their responsibility for overseeing—or failing to oversee—the contract properly. Indeed, the Defence Committee has concluded that the record of the MOD and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation in managing service accommodation has been “lamentable”.

Looking to the future, the MOD is currently in the process of taking bids for the four regional facilities management contracts, with a decision expected in February. Will the Minister set out how the Department will ensure that whoever takes over the running of MOD housing will be held to the highest standards? What assurances are being sought and what penalties will be in place to deter poor performance?

The Department is also still working on the future accommodation model. That causes concern to those living in service family accommodation, with the families federations recording confusion, anxiety and uncertainty over the past two years. I have said many times that the Opposition do not want to see personnel being forced into the private rented sector, with all the additional costs and insecurity that could result, but can the Minister at least provide some certainty to families about when they will learn more about what is being planned?

One of the most worrying trends that we have witnessed over the past few years is the fall in morale of serving personnel and the perception that the overall offer to those who serve is declining. Morale has fallen steadily since 2010 across both officer and other ranks, and, very worryingly, the proportion of Royal Marines who rate their service morale as high has more than halved in the last two years alone.

James Heappey: The 2010 data coincide with an end to the most regular and intense operations, and it is indeed a perversity of the mindset of those of us who have served that we are happiest when we have some combat operations to go away on, so I cannot help but feel that the dip in morale since is a consequence of that, as well as other factors that I am sure the hon. Lady is about to mention in her speech.

Nia Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that valid point.

The number of training exercises that have been cancelled will not have helped matters, nor will the months of leaked reports on plans to cut the Marines as part of the modernising defence programme. The state of morale should concern us all, so I would be grateful if the Minister set out what he feels is behind this worrying fall, and more importantly, what he plans to do about it, because low morale will only compound the problems that we are already experiencing with retention in the forces. Personnel numbers are down across each of the services compared with last year.

Satisfaction with pay and pensions is the lowest ever recorded, and while I am of course pleased that the Government have finally agreed to lift the pay cap, this alone will not make up for seven years of below-inflation rises, and of course the Treasury has refused to provide the money centrally, meaning that we are likely to see yet more defence cuts.

As we had a debate on veterans last week, I will keep my comments on specific veterans issues brief, but I want to raise with the Minister my very considerable concerns about further privatisation of the veterans service. Members from across the House have talked about Capita’s abject failure to deliver the recruitment contract and Ministers’ seeming unwillingness to sack the company, so would the Minister kindly explain to the House why, given the problems with other contracts, his Department now proposes to hand over yet more services, including the armed forces compensation scheme, the war pension scheme, the Veterans Welfare Service and the Medal Office, to private contractors, who inevitably
will be tempted to put profit before serving our veterans? And Members do not need me to tell them who one of the bidders is in this case. Will the Minister put a stop to this now, and have a complete rethink?

James Heappey: As a former adjutant, I agree very much that the best recruiters are serving military personnel and I think that the old-fashioned recruiting sergeant does that much better than a civilian, but that model of recruitment meant lots of people being appropriated from regimental duty to go off and recruit, causing all sorts of tensions when we were trying to fill our order of battle within a unit. So while I understand the hon. Lady’s point, the MOD needed to make a difficult decision between operational effectiveness and the recruiting operation.

Nia Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I am asking why we are privatising more services, including the particular ones I mentioned. I would like the Minister to explain why the Government are not considering putting a stop to this and having a complete rethink.

At the heart of all these issues is the need to ensure that the promises made in the covenant are being effectively delivered in a way that benefits the forces community—regulars, reservists, veterans and families.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady recognise that there is a disproportionate number of veterans in Northern Ireland—not just those, like the Minister, who served in Operation Banner, but those who served in other sectors? Does the hon. Lady feel—as I, other Northern Ireland Members, and, I suspect, the Minister, feel—that there is a need for more proportionate funding for veterans in Northern Ireland because of the large scale of service that there has been? In terms of looking after people, the service of those from Northern Ireland needs particular attention.

Nia Griffith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making a valid point, and we are very grateful to all those from Northern Ireland who have served our forces so well.

Local authorities are responsible for many of the services that fulfil the covenant’s guarantees, yet they have borne the brunt of much of the Government’s austerity programme. Many councils are doing their very best, despite devastating budget cuts from central Government, and I pay tribute to the armed forces champions who do so much in councils up and down the country to promote the armed forces covenant—and look forward to welcoming some of our Labour champions to Parliament on Monday. However, as the Minister has said, “we know there is much more still to be achieved, particularly in ensuring consistency of outcomes”, and I think that there is a discussion to be had on whether some aspects of the covenant should be formalised as statutory duties to ensure that they are being delivered properly, because ultimately what matters are not the warm words of politicians, but the real-life experience of our forces community, who do so much for us all and who deserve the very best.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have been informed that the Prime Minister is to make a statement to this House at 3 o’clock. However, I understand that the Prime Minister has already spoken to the press outside No. 10 Downing Street. I consider that that to be a gross discourtesy to this House.

Secondly, I understand that an agreement has been reached between the Prime Minister and the European Union on a draft declaration. I would have thought that that draft declaration would be available to this House, but as of 10 minutes ago it is not available in the Table Office. Will you ensure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that that draft declaration is made available well before the Prime Minister gets to her feet at 3 o’clock?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): It is good practice to share such information and there is still time. If Her Majesty’s Opposition have got to listen to a statement they should be well informed in order to be able to put the right questions. I also say that this House should be told first, not the TV studios; Members of Parliament are here to be told first, not everyone else. We know that that is best practice and it should be the practice: whoever they are, they should come to this House first, and then by all means go to the TV studios. The hon. Gentleman has put that on the record, and I hope that anything that needs to be printed and produced will be ready for the 3 o’clock statement. We do have time, and I am sure that message has gone out loud and clear, and I am sure the Whips will be dealing with it very quickly.

Mr Ellwood: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I confirm that, in coming to the House and presenting the ninth annual armed forces covenant report, I did not go to the media beforehand, but came here first?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the best practice, and I am sure you will advise the Prime Minister on how to take it forward in the future. What a great Minister you are.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): On a point of order. The outworking of the statement that we are due to hear at 3 o’clock this afternoon is, I imagine, that this important consideration of our armed forces covenant will be curtailed. Can you confirm whether the intention is to have the winding-up speeches in this debate before the Prime Minister’s statement, or do you envisage its proceeding beyond the point of interruption? What are the plans for full consideration of the covenant statement?

Mr Deputy Speaker: In fairness, that is also in the hands of Members such as your good self, who have put in to speak. They can help the House to finish this debate ready for the statement. I am sure that the Whips will work closely to ensure that that happens. Looking at the time, I am sure that everything will come on time, as predicted and as, I would say, now planned.

1.21 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In view of the unexpected extra performance by the Prime Minister this afternoon, I shall endeavour to confine my contribution to this debate to one specific area, but let me begin by putting on the record the delight of members of the Defence Committee at the success of one of our members, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), in being
elected president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. That is not only a feather in the United Kingdom’s cap, but a well-deserved recognition of the hon. Lady’s many years of dedicated support for the cause of defence in general and NATO in particular. We are absolutely delighted for her.

I wish also to record my thanks to another member of the Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is not here this afternoon but who was here last Thursday, deputising for me. He made an admirably comprehensive speech, in which he touched on the issue I will speak to today: the plight of 200 to 300 war widows who lost their war widow’s pension on remarriage or cohabitation and who have not had it restored. I had not imagined that, only seven days after having to miss that debate, I would have the opportunity in this debate on the armed forces covenant report to make amends. Clearly, there is a high degree of interest in the armed forces in the Government, or perhaps their attention is somewhat distracted by Brexit concerns; either way, we must make the most of the opportunities.

I mentioned how fortunate I am in the calibre of members of the Defence Committee; it is worth pointing out also that we as a country are fortunate in the calibre of our defence ministerial team. They are a strong team. We have a Secretary of State who, although new to the subject, has shown himself not only willing and ready to listen to those who have been acquainted with it for many years, but also determined—if one can persuade him of the rightness of an issue—to go out there and fight to put a new policy into practice. That is especially true in relation to the inadequate defence budget. I hope he will redouble his efforts to rectify that woeful situation.

We are also fortunate in our two Ministers in the Commons and our representation in the House of Lords, but I do not envy—I suspect no one would—the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), for the sheer range and complexity of the matters with which he has to deal, although there is no doubt that he has mastered his brief. When we compare the distribution of ministerial office in the Ministry of Defence with other Departments of similar prestige, I do not understand why we have only one Minister of State. Personally, I think it would be good if the Veterans Minister were to be redesignated to Minister of State level, not only because of the obvious ability of the present occupant, but because of the strong message it would send to the veterans community about the importance and the status of their concerns.

Bob Stewart: May I wholeheartedly endorse that comment? The Minister currently on the Treasury Bench, who opened the debate, would make a superb Minister of State.

Dr Lewis: And so say all of us. I hope the Whips are delighted for her.

Dr Lewis: Heaven forbid.

Other matters deserved equal attention today. We have heard about the legal hounding of Northern Ireland veterans and other veterans of different campaigns; that is an ongoing matter. Also, at some point it would be right for the House to consider the Home Office’s failure to allocate sufficient British passports to veterans of the Hong Kong Military Service Corps and the Royal Navy. That injustice needs to be rectified. However, as I said, in the time available to me today I will concentrate on war widows, and I will do so slightly unusually—in their own words.

First, I remind the House of the terms of the covenant itself, which the Minister read out. The words relevant to my remarks are the following:

“the whole nation has a moral obligation to the members of the Naval Service, the Army and the Royal Air Force, together with their families... Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most, such as the injured and the bereaved.”

Back in May, I had the pleasure of meeting Judith Thompson, the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. We discussed the plight of 200 to 300 war widows who lost their war widow’s pension and did not have it reinstated when others were more fortunate.

I see the hon. Member for Bridgend has just taken her place. Sadly, she missed the tribute paid to her by the Minister for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), who is not here today, and who opened the debate, would make a superb Minister of State.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab) indicated assent.

Dr Lewis: I am glad to see that she will—very good. We look forward to that.

Very recently—it arrived a few days before last week’s debate, which is why I was so anxious that the matter be flagged up—Judith sent me something I had asked for in the course of our conversation: a concise summary of the situation and some personal recollections and reflections by individual war widows. I intend to put those on the record today.

First, the summary. This is how the commissioner spells out the situation:

“If your spouse died or left Military or War Service before 31 March 1973 and you also receive the War Pension Scheme Supplementary Pension you keep your War Widow’s Pension for life. If you were widowed after 5 April 2005 and receive Survivors Guaranteed Income Payment from the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme you keep your War Widow’s Pension for life.

From 1st April 2015 if your spouse died, left Military or War Service after 31 March 1973 and before 5 April 2005 and you were in receipt of a War Widow’s Pension on that 1st April 2015, you keep your War Widow’s Pension for life.

There is an anomaly, which is that if a person who was unlucky enough to fall outside the appropriate date range were now to divorce their other half, their husband or wife, the pension would be reinstated, and if they were then to remarry the very same person, the pension would not be taken away. That is, frankly, bonkers. It is
basically creating a perverse incentive on people who, by definition, have already suffered trauma and tragedy to part from the person with whom they have found renewed happiness and go through a charade of this sort if they wish to have the pension permanently reinstated.

Gavin Robinson: The Chair of the Select Committee is right not only to highlight that anomaly but to press the point that the moral case has been won—we just need to see the corresponding action. There is a further perverse anomaly. In Northern Ireland, under Operation Banner, members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary served and died alongside members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and other regiments. Widows of RUC men who were killed, of whom there are 302, have had this issue resolved, yet the bereaved widows of service members who may have died alongside RUC service personnel have not, to date, had a resolution.

Dr Lewis: My excellent friend, for that is what he is—he is another pillar of strength to me on the Defence Committee—will be glad to know that among the examples I intend to quote are several widows who lost a husband serving in the Ulster Defence Regiment and who are in precisely that anomalous position.

This is what happened in the case of Linda, whose husband John was murdered by the IRA in May 1973:

“He died instantly as a boobytrap bomb exploded underneath him. We were stationed in Germany at the time of John’s deployment. Within two days of his death my three month old son and I were put on a flight back to England, leaving behind our life, home and friends to face an uncertain future. With my mum’s help and support I was eventually able to move into a small home of my own and begin to rebuild my life. This is where I received my first ‘inspection’.

In the early 70s War Widows were visited by inspectors to ensure they were not living with another man whilst in receipt of their compensation pension. I felt degraded by this. Life was lonely as a young women with a baby and over time I missed the family life I so tragically had taken from me. I missed my son having a father, I missed the closeness and friendship of a husband.

After years alone I was blessed with a second chance of happiness but felt saddened that my pension would be withdrawn on remarriage as this was a tangible link to John and our previous life together. I also felt this action demeaned John’s sacrifice and that somehow I was no longer a War Widow. However, I had a choice to make and I chose to be part of a loving family again with the security and warmth that it would bring my son and I.

When going through the process of having my pension revoked I spoke to many officials and was insulted when one of them told me ‘not to worry, another man will now look after you.’ Once more I felt let down as I would have to start my new relationship not as an equal but financially dependent on my new husband.

As was stated in 2015 this was a choice that should not have been forced on War Widows. I was personally heartbroken when I was told that pension changes in 2015 had left me behind. The utter disbelief that the government didn’t really mean ALL War Widows would now have their pensions for life was unbearable. These changes made me feel like a second class War Widow and I have now been made to relive the pain and grief of 1973 every day. I cannot and will not accept that John’s sacrifice is less worthy than others.”

Bob Stewart: My right hon. Friend has just read out a very touching story. John would expect his country to look after his widow for life. It is a very simple matter. Let us correct it now.

Dr Lewis: I entirely agree with my hon. and gallant Friend. Of all 650 Members of this House, he knows better than anyone, in personal terms, the devastation these killings left behind. That is why I intend to read out several more extracts before concluding. Mr Deputy Speaker, please indicate if you feel I am going on too long.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The Whip is there.

Dr Lewis: Okay, I will do my best. I do not intend to elaborate over and above the words, which speak for themselves.

Muriel, the widow of Jimmy, writes:

“My husband was 40 years old when he was murdered and I was left a widow at 37 with 5 children. Jimmy gave his life in defence of this country and I believe I should have the recognition that I am a war widow. It should make no difference that he died in 1977 and not on another date that the government has decided qualifies widows for pensions.

My husband was murdered because he put on a uniform and tried to uphold law and order. He died in his own home when gunmen shot him at our front door. I have had to live with the horror of this and our family has suffered terribly but instead of feeling that the government recognises our sacrifice we feel betrayed and that we are a nuisance asking for money the government says it can’t afford. I felt I had done something wrong when I remarried and tried to rebuild my life, as if everything that I went through meant nothing.

I don’t even get a full state pension because I paid married woman’s national insurance and I often think I should have been better off as the MoD should have given more priority to my welfare. I am a war widow and should be acknowledged as such and the government must do the decent thing and reinstate the pension for those of us whose lives were destroyed so that democracy could flourish.”

Now I come to a daughter, Elizabeth, who says:

“I am disappointed and saddened that I am even writing this… My Father”—

John—

“was a member of the UDR and he was shot dead when aged 40 years in 1981 doing his civilian job.”

I will not go through the events that happened, but Elizabeth continues:

“Each Remembrance Day and on my Dad’s anniversary, we remember him with pride. The impact of my Dad’s murder was severe, my Mum was left to bring up 3 children. I was aged 11 years. This was very difficult for my Mum both financially and emotionally. We all as a family still struggle today.

When she remarried her war pension was taken away from her. This is an absolute disgrace. We as children were still orphaned. It is a struggle for my Mum. She has no financial security in her later years and she can’t help her family the way she would like to. My Dad would be extremely saddened at the way the MoD have treated us.”

That is the very point made a few moments ago by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Elizabeth continues:

“I would also like to add that the aftercare is a disgrace as there actually isn’t any aftercare. When I enquired at the MoD about the pension being reinstated I was told no but if my Mum divorced her husband and then remarried him again she would get it back. How morally wrong is this? It is ridiculous that she is being penalised because of when my Father was murdered and for when she remarried. The pension should be reinstated and a full apology given for the way my Mum and other widows have been treated.”
Bob Stewart: And backdated.

Dr Lewis: And backdated.

Mrs Madeleine Moon: I wish to thank the Chairman of the Select Committee, particularly for the leadership he gives those of us who serve on that Committee. The more he reads out, the more it becomes absolutely clear that Governments are happy to write names on memorials and to make soundbites in this Chamber, but they are not willing to allow the country to maintain its financial commitment and promises to war widows and their children to mitigate for their lost life. As parliamentarians, should we not take that into our hands, perhaps as the Committee, by putting forward a private Member’s Bill?

Dr Lewis: That is a wonderful idea, and it is exactly the sort of constructive suggestion I would expect from the hon. Lady. I suspect that at the root of this situation is probably not a flaw in the Ministry of Defence, but a problem being raised by people from the Treasury saying, “If we do something for this group, we’ll have to do something for another group. We will have to do something for another group. We will be opening some sort of Pandora’s box.” And so on and so on. I say, frankly: if that is the argument, they should hang their heads in shame.

Although I think I have already made the point quite forcefully, I intend, if I may, to read out two or three more of these extracts, so that the point cannot be escaped, because every one of these stories has a different dimension. I say, frankly: if that is the argument, they should hang their heads in shame.

I come to the case of Margaret, whose first husband, William, was a part-time member of the Ulster Defence Regiment. He was murdered—blown up—in 1986. She says:

“At the time we didn’t know if we would ever be able to have William’s coffin open due the extent of injuries… in the end all we could see was his face, with a wee cut just above his right eye. No one has ever been convicted of William’s murder.

She talks about the “rituals” that they always had to go through for their own security, and the circumstances in which what happened took place. She continues:

“I am now happily remarried to my second husband, John and we have two sons. When I married my second husband John in 1993 I automatically lost my pension. To me this was highly unfair, as older widows and now younger widows have got to keep their pensions, what is the difference, between widows like them and me? I have endured the same trials and tribulations as them.

I detest writing this letter and find it extremely difficult, to me it’s like a begging letter, yes I have endured financial hardships in the past and if my pension was reinstated it would mean a lot to me financially, it would be extremely useful for my two sons’ further education and for repairs to our home. But, to me, it would be some acknowledgement from the Government that they realise and appreciate that William laid down his life for his country and for our people, and that although I have remarried I still bear the scars of the past.”

The final extract I will read, given the unexpected time pressures, I hope the other ladies will forgive me—is from Eileen, whose husband David served part-time in the UDR and was murdered in 1977. She says:

“I was so proud of my husband and how he sacrificed his life to try to keep to his community safe at nights and weekends. When he was on duty I waited at home in bed until he arrived safely back home. Those were worrying times for me.

I felt the need to serve my country with pride and also allowed my family to make a positive contribution to maintaining peace and I became a member of the UDR in 1984.”

So this lady, seven years after losing her husband in the defence of her country, joined the same regiment herself. Does that not make us feel proud of her and does it not make us all feel ashamed of the way that she and the other women whose stories I have related today have been treated?

1.45 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Let me echo the comments made by the esteemed Chair of the Select Committee and congratulate our colleague on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), on her elevation in becoming the NATO Parliamentary Assembly president. I am sure she will serve in that role with great distinction. All I can say is—I was there when it happened.

Mrs Moon: I would not want people to think I had already got above myself, in not being here for the start of the debate. I had a visit from members of Parc prison, in my constituency, who went to the Ministry of Justice to be given an award for their work with young prisoners with autism, and I felt they deserved my time. This was not a case of neglecting this debate; I got here as quickly as I could and I do apologise to colleagues.

Douglas Chapman: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate on a topic that affects every Member of this House. Those who are serving or who have served in our armed forces are owed a great debt of gratitude by us all, and they deserve to be supported and looked after, both in service and after they have left.

The core principles of the armed forces covenant set out to ensure that these individuals suffer no disadvantage compared with other citizens when it comes to accessing services and that, where appropriate, they are given special consideration. However, according to some of the personal accounts I have heard, that is not always their experience. We have heard a long list of other examples from people across the country for whom this is not their experience either. We know that that must change, and I welcome the Minister’s recognition that change was inevitable and that continuous improvement in the support for veterans was required.

The Ministry of Defence is currently struggling to recruit and retain the personnel we need. This year, the British Army was 4,000 troops short of the 82,000 it was set to have; only 7,500 were recruited. It is 2,000 shy of the 10,000 required to maintain troop numbers. The total number of trained personnel based in Scotland dropped by almost 2% in 2016, to 9,970; with a drop of almost 19% in the officer ranks. Across the rest of the UK, the picture is no better, with an astonishing 10% drop in the number of new recruits. The Public Accounts Committee report published in September reported skills shortages in more than 100 critical trades. All of this leads us to see a jigsaw that will undoubtedly have an impact on existing personnel, through increased workloads and pressure, not to mention an alarming lack of capability to respond to the changing threats facing the UK.
On remuneration, the Government say that they are moving away from the 1% pay cap for public sector workers, which is to be welcomed. However, the Defence Committee noted that:

“no additional funding will be made available to the MoD for increases above this level for Service personnel”.

Those who serve in our armed forces are exceptionally skilled and committed people, and they absolutely deserve better than what they are getting at the moment. Furthermore, if we are to have any hope of attracting the talent and skills we need to the services, the MOD has to do better than the decidedly unattractive package currently on offer.

Other Members have talked about housing. For years, service personnel and their families have had to put up with poor maintenance standards that would simply not be tolerated in the local government sector. In June, the Defence Committee stated:

“The record of Carillon/Amey, the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO) in managing Service accommodation has been lamentable.”

This disrespect of armed forces personnel and their families is one of the reasons that people are increasingly leaving the services. Ministers must urgently grip the dysfunctional organisation and lay out an action plan for radical improvement.

Mrs Moon: One of the issues brought to my attention by John Allison is the problem with local authorities’ residency rules for allowing people to move from the military into areas where they might not have had a previous residence in order to set up home. That is resulting in people being denied housing accommodation. This should have been dealt with in the armed forces covenant. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to ensure that we do not have a homelessness problem among our veterans when they leave the military?

Douglas Chapman: The hon. Lady makes a valid point, and I will discuss what is happening in that regard in Scotland a bit later in my speech.

Ministers must get a grip of the current situation if they are to convince service personnel and their families that they are valued and that their housing needs will be cared for appropriately in future. The welfare of families is often challenged directly by the difficult lifestyles of those who serve, and considerations relating to the continuity of education for children, support for spouses, financial advice and family accommodation must be taken more seriously.

I would suggest that veterans in Scotland have a somewhat different experience of accessing public services from those south of the border, and I make no apology for that. It is a thoroughly good thing, and if we can learn from other parts of the UK in order to improve matters for everyone, surely that is the best way forward.

The Scottish National party Government in Edinburgh established a £1.3 million Scottish veterans fund to support projects that provide a wide range of advice and practical support to veterans. As well as having a Minister responsible for veterans in the Scottish Government, we have appointed a Scottish veterans commissioner—the first such position anywhere in the UK. Our commissioner produced a report on veterans’ health and wellbeing earlier this year, the recommendations of which the Scottish Government are taking forward.

Members have mentioned the importance of armed forces champions, and I want to say a big thank you to my local authority armed forces champion, Councillor Rod Cavanagh from Fife Council, who does a tremendous job. I am sure that his commitment and efforts are being replicated across the country by our other armed forces champions to keep the needs of their armed forces at the heart of local government, alongside the work that we do here to keep these matters at the heart of central Government.

The care and health of our veterans is of huge importance, particularly in the area of mental health, which the Minister spoke enthusiastically and sincerely about. Our society is becoming more open to discussing mental health issues in general, but we must ensure that the specific concerns of veterans are included within this evolution. The armed forces charity SSAFA found in 2016 that 40% of working-age veterans said that they were suffering from depression, that 36% felt they had a lack of hope or purpose, and that 30% reported mental health problems. SSAFA also found that loneliness and isolation were widely reported. I welcome the £10 million of further support allocated to addressing the mental health needs of veterans at the last Budget, and I hope that that line of funding continues to be a priority area for addressing the needs of veterans.

I should like to return to the question of housing and homelessness. There are varying estimates of the number of veterans who might be homeless, ranging from 7,000 to 13,000 across the UK. It is shameful in this day and age that homelessness should be the future for any citizen, never mind for people who have served their country. Members may be aware that, in Scotland, all local authorities have a duty to provide permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless. The code of guidance on homelessness in Scotland states that housing applications from veterans should be treated sympathetically and that close links should be made between the armed forces and local bodies to help to support those re-entering civilian life.

The Scottish Government have also recently updated their Scottish housing guide for people leaving the armed forces and for ex-service personnel, which contains advice on all accommodation options for veterans.

There are a lot of really good organisations already providing support to armed forces personnel and veterans in Scotland, and we all know who they are, but I would welcome the development of a more comprehensive support network for veterans and, in particular, for those who feel that they have absolutely nowhere to turn. I look forward to seeing the new tri-service defence holistic transition policy when it is published next month, and I hope that it will go some way towards filling the gaps.

My SNP colleagues and I support the creation of an armed forces union to accommodate the wide range of interests, concerns and identities within this community. We owe our armed forces personnel a voice in the development of policies that serve and support them and their work, and this should take the form of a permanent organisation that can readily represent and consult current and former personnel. The body should be able to be truly representative. It would not be a trade union in the sense that people would be able to go on strike. Rather, it would be like the bodies that support police officers, for example. Such a body could support
our armed forces personnel to enable them to raise genuine concerns and areas of interest affecting all serving personnel in a mature and adult way, to ensure that their voice was heard.

The armed forces covenant has provided a central focus for developing a veterans policy, but there is still much more work to be done. We need to do all we can to ensure that our veterans and serving personnel feel included in the decisions that are made on their behalf to help them back into civilian life. I speak for all my colleagues on these Benches when I say that we stand ready to support any measures that the Minister might wish to bring in, so long as the issues around pay, housing and support for our armed forces personnel and veterans are at the heart of the discussions.

When the armed forces covenant was established in 2011, it was wildly welcomed nationally and in my constituency, where we play host to an important Army base and an infantry training range. We also play host to 160 Brigade. Consequently, we are home to a large number of serving and retired Army personnel, together with their families. Added to this, just 15 miles across the border and Offa’s Dyke in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), we are proud to have another important Army base where the SAS are based.

As we know, the covenant outlines the nation’s moral obligation to respect and support current and former members of the armed forces and their families. More particularly, the covenant commits the nation to ensure that those who serve in the Armed Forces, whether Regular or Reserve, and their families, should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.

I am delighted to report that the community in and around mid-Wales has been supporting military personnel and their families for decades, if not centuries. We are home to the military museum at the barracks in Brecon. The barracks are under the threat of closure, but I shall make sure that that does not happen. The barracks play host to a wonderful collection, which features the South Wales Borderers, whose conflict in the Anglo-Zulu war was immortalised in the film “Zulu.” It is very important to our nation.

We also play host to a Gurkha troop. As one walks around Brecon, it warms the heart to see Nepalese people working behind the counter of the local supermarket and involved in the local town council and all aspects of society. It did not take a formal covenant to get that support in my constituency, which is like so many constituencies that host Army, Navy and Air Force bases. People in our country naturally accept and adopt everything to do with our servicemen and women and their families. That is the right thing to do. The covenant has ensured that the whole of society supports it, from national Government, local government and devolved Government to voluntary and charitable bodies, businesses and private organisations, and including the actions of individuals and community groups, so this joined-up approach can only and must only be a good thing.

Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most, such as the bereaved families, together with the injured—when I say injured, I mean both physically injured and mentally injured. It has taken some time for us in this country to understand that the mental damage caused to so many veterans is real and is on a larger scale than was first anticipated and accepted. We must talk about these issues publicly, and I am delighted that under our Prime Minister, and before when she was Home Secretary, we have now been doing that. Until quite recently, it was not accepted that PTSD was an issue, but it is a very serious one.

On the theme of mental health, I wish briefly to talk about a constituent of mine whose case I have been involved in for the past three years. Gus Hales has been in the public eye a little bit recently, because he has been on hunger strike in the town of Newport—he lives just outside Builth Wells in my constituency. Gus served as a soldier in the Falklands conflict and in other conflicts around the world, but he has not had the treatment that he rightly deserves. Just before Armistice Day, I sat on a grass verge in Newport, which is a two-hour drive from my constituency, outside Combat Stress, with which Gus has an issue, in a most undignified manner, because there I was sitting next to a gentleman who had served this country and who was on hunger strike because of the complaints he had. Those complaints were very justified.

The Minister has already been praised, but I wish to praise him some more, because he has not only spent three quarters of an hour in a telephone conversation with Gus, but had several conversations and meetings with me. Sitting on that grass verge outside Combat Stress, it was heartening to hear Gus praise our Minister, who showed not only empathy but complete and total understanding of Gus’s case and his issue. I thank the Minister for everything that he has done, because believe me it has made my life a lot easier and it was comforting to hear Gus say what he said about him.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has raised such an important case. Combat Stress does such an amazing job, but in the provision of support for our armed forces, people occasionally fall through the gaps. We must make sure that that does not happen. I formally apologise to Gus Hales for what he has gone through. As my hon. Friend said, Gus and I have spoken on the phone, and I stand ready to meet him again. Combat Stress has put its hand up to say yes, it got it wrong with Mr Hales. I thank him for his service and for all he has done for our country. We must learn from this case. If anybody else has received a level of support that is questionable and not what we would expect, please come forward. Let us learn from this, move forward and make sure that we support our brave veterans to the standard that they expect.
Chris Davies: I thank the Minister for his wise words and his support for this case. There is criticism of Combat Stress, but I am sure most people in the House will remember that just a few months ago I reinvented the Lords against Commons pigeon race—it was one of the great events of 2018 in this place and will be remembered for decades to come, I am sure—and the charity that we raised money for and to which so many Members of this House and of the other place donated was Combat Stress. It was the designated charity, and it does a tremendous amount of work, as do so many charities. Nevertheless, mistakes were made, as the Minister said. He has ordered a review of Combat Stress and the period when mistakes were made and veterans slipped through the net. I can only praise him again for that. I must also say to any veteran listening out there: please do not stay away from Combat Stress, because just like so many other charities, it is still doing an enormous amount of tremendous work for our veterans. That work will continue, because we must not forget that PTSD does not happen just like that; it can happen 10, 15 or 20 years after people have retired—after our servicemen and women have seen conflict. It is very important that Combat Stress continues to offer that support.

Mrs Moon: The hon. Gentleman mentioned that Gus served in the Falklands. I do not know whether part of the problem that Gus is experiencing today is because of that service, but is the hon. Gentleman aware of the support that the Falkland Islanders still give to veterans? They subsidise flights so that veterans can return to the Falklands, and they give them support in revisiting some of the battlefields and help them to work through some of the trauma that they experienced. I wonder whether that might help Gus. If the hon. Gentleman is interested, I can give him further details later.

Chris Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I congratulate her on her election referred to earlier. A Member of the Legislative Assembly flew over from the Falkland Islands when they heard that Gus was on hunger strike, and they have been involved in his case.

Among the many people who have been involved in Gus’s case are my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who is not present, and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan). I thank them for their support for Gus and, indeed, their work with Combat Stress. I pay tribute to the president of Combat Stress, General Sir Peter Wall, who has gone to Newport in Shropshire on several occasions to meet Gus. Ironically, he was previously Gus’s commanding officer, so it is wonderful that he has offered that support. A great deal is happening, but I wanted to raise Gus’s case because he has done a lot and has caught the public eye. It is important now that the Department and we MPs get behind our veterans and make sure that nobody else has to go on a hunger strike to bring these issues to our attention.

Combat Stress is not the only charity out there, of course. The Royal British Legion was very much to the fore in the run-up to Armistice Day. I also wish to pay tribute to Care after Combat, which is unfortunately one of those charities that some people stay away from, because it primarily deals with people who are in prison. They are ex-servicemen and women who, in the main, have mental health issues. They are in prison because of drug and drink-related issues and because they cannot cope with society. Care after Combat does such a good job and is one of the only charities to take these people on board, take them under its wing and look after them. I pay exceptional tribute to Jim Davidson, who is of course well known in many other theatres, not necessarily the theatre of the House of Commons. He has done a superb job of taking these servicemen and women under his wing as chief executive of that charity. He does a vital job.

I am being pressed by the Whips because of the time, but before I sit down, let me give the House a statistic for Care after Combat. In the first year, the reoffending rate is 8% when Care after Combat gets involved, compared with the national average of 45%. That just shows how a little bit of money goes a long way with such a superb charity.

Mrs Moon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. We in Wales can be exceptionally proud that Parc Prison, which largely takes prisoners from Wales, has established the endeavour unit, which particularly focuses on veterans. The work that it has been able to do with building veterans’ links with charities, such as Care after Combat and many others, has turned veterans’ lives around and changed their reoffending rates. That is something of which we in Wales can be very proud, and I am particularly proud that it is happening at Parc in Bridgend.

Chris Davies: A lady with a prison—you can’t beat that, can you? I congratulate the hon. Lady on that.

Bob Stewart: I am a spokesman for Care after Combat. Jim Davidson is a very good friend of mine. Care after Combat becomes even more effective when it gets funded. It has been funded by the Government previously, and I hope that they will look very kindly on re-funding the charity, which does such sterling work.

Chris Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has just stolen my summing-up line, but I can think of no greater person to make that plea than my gallant and hon. Friend. Care after Combat deserves to be supported; it has been supported in the past. There was very welcome news in the Budget of an additional £10 million for the armed forces covenant fund, which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Unfortunately, Care after Combat does not fall within the rules to get that money. I urge the Minister to help in any way, because this is a worthwhile charity, as so many of them are, and it is certainly a charity that many of my Government colleagues, and I am sure Opposition Members as well, think deserves ongoing support.

2.11 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The armed forces covenant is an extremely important document not just because it recognises the value that armed forces personnel have in public life, but because it recognises our duty of care to servicemen and women and their families. It is that duty of care that has motivated me to address this debate on the subject of service family accommodation.

A life in the military is transient and uncertain. It means moving across the country and, in some cases, across borders. For service personnel, it means setting
up a home and a life in a place, with the knowledge that they may have to repeat the process again very soon. It means them having little or no choice about their location and type of accommodation. Given this sacrifice, as well as the other sacrifices that our servicemen and women make every day, it is reasonable for all service families to expect that, wherever they are stationed, they are guaranteed a secure, affordable and comfortable home in which to live and raise their children. As a nation, to meet our obligations enshrined in the armed forces covenant, we need to do all in our power to see that this very practical and important need is met.

The armed forces covenant states that service accommodation should be “good quality, affordable and suitably located.” I attest that this component of the covenant not only is unmet, but has been categorically failed. In 1996, the Ministry of Defence sold off 57,400 service family homes to Annington, a subsidiary of the Japanese bank Nomura. Annington has since been sold to private equity firm Terra Firma for a profit—thought to be in the region of £2 billion. This has caused not only a serious black hole in the MOD’s finances, but great concern among armed forces families about their financial future. The ripple effect of the decision is significant. Annington has sold off 20,000 homes over the past two decades. Many forces families who are living in those houses were told that they could not stay—even if they had the means to buy those houses—as they were contractually obliged to return them to their original state. For many, their only option was to queue in a field for hours without any guarantee over what house they would get.

The contract agreed by the Government in 1996 allowed a rent review in 2021—just three years from now. There is nothing to stop Annington from charging market rent. Although we know that the MOD would like rents to fall, Annington expects them to rise significantly from 2021. The MOD could hand back the cost, but like rents to fall, Annington expects them to rise significantly from 2021. The MOD could hand back the cost, but that would be very expensive. There are very few cards to play. Annington holds the monopoly. Indeed, rents are already rising significantly and new service families are already paying 2020 rents.

In 2016, Annington put 147 houses in Hawe barracks up for auction on 25-year short leases. Councils, desperate for housing stock to reduce waiting lists, bid at an auction and an out-of-area council won. These are state entities using state funds to bid on housing stock, which was owned by the state in 1996. The profits from this have filled the pockets of a private equity firm. That is a failure and a disgrace.

The result is far-reaching. There are very few houses left for armed forces families. In my most local garrison in Catterick, there are no houses at all for new postings to move into. Planned additional housing is yet to materialise and there are strong suspicions about whether the new super-garrison will be delivered on time. When it is delivered, it will be one of only three super-garrisons in the UK. Many regiments plan to move there. Can the Minister guarantee enough housing for service families in Yorkshire even after that is delivered?

Many service families have been pushed into the private rented sector. Indeed, the future accommodation model has set out the option for the introduction of a rental allowance to allow families to rent privately.

A survey carried out by the Army Families Federation, a fantastic organisation that gives a voice to service families, looked closely at this matter. There was great concern over affordability, access to schools, the difficulty in obtaining housing, the lack of time to look and the security of tenure. One of the starkest observations was the loss of the support networks and the understanding that comes from living in a military community. Some 59% said that a loss of a military community was a negative or very negative aspect of renting privately. They also cited the difficulty of establishing themselves in an existing community with the transient nature of a service family’s life.

One person who had lived outside of the military community said:

“It was difficult to integrate into an already established community, there was a feeling of detachment from the unit when my spouse was deployed. They made many efforts for which I was grateful, but the geographical distance establishes an automatic sense of isolation.”

This loss of community is happening within existing barracks, too. In a parliamentary question last year, I asked how many civilians, not including reservists or civil servants—so these are civilians unattached to the military—are subletting service family accommodation. The number for 2017-18 had more than doubled from the previous year and tripled from the year before that. The figures included sublets only and did not include the former SFAs in Army garrisons that have been taken into the private sector. This practice raises all kinds of security issues, causes a strain on resources designed and built for military life and does nothing to foster the community that is so vital to service family life.

All these problems can be traced back to that single act of selling military housing to Nomura. This sale, like much of the privatisation projects of the past few decades, was sweetened with the promise of quality and an end to the dilapidation of the past. However, the standard of these houses is far from satisfactory for many of the service personnel. Less than half of regular personnel are happy with their accommodation, and the Army Families Federation says that accommodation is by far the top issue reported to them by personnel. One member of a service family, who very understandably asked not to be named, said:

“The single soldier’s accommodation facilities are dire. There are 4 men sharing rooms as standard. These have not been updated in line with new regulations about single soldiers having single rooms with en suite facilities”— these do not even have en suite facilities—“and it’s like a permanent sleepover that nobody wanted to go to.”

If the armed forces covenant is to be honoured, we must see to our end of the bargain. We must ensure that we have homes fit for heroes. Anyone who risks life and limb in service to this country deserves to live in the knowledge that they and their families will be taken care of and that they will have a home to come back to. Ending the scandal that has caused this crisis in military housing must be a top priority for us all.

2.18 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate. I set up the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant when I was first elected in 2015, and found
that the covenant had been published for five years, but had never been discussed in the House. It was a great pleasure to persuade the Backbench Business Committee to give colleagues and me time to do so. Two years on, it is even more exciting to see the Government bringing the matter forward themselves. I commend the Minister because I know that it is down to his efforts that this is now part of the national conversation. That is, of course, what the covenant is and should be—part of the national conversation. It is also a moral obligation that is practically delivered, and it is thought about by everybody who lives and works in our great country.

I will cover a few areas today. The report is extensive and shows the real depth of work that is beginning to emerge in this area, and that is fantastic to see. I would like to raise just a few issues that are brought to me most often by serving families and, indeed, veterans.

The first is education for the children of service personnel. It is fantastic that the Department has agreed to finance the education support fund for another two years. This is used by those who are doing research and helping us to understand, in particular by data collection, much more about the impacts on service family children. That is incredibly welcome, because it is very difficult for Ministers to make decisions that will genuinely be effective if they do not understand the realities of the situation.

I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill some 18 months ago asking the Department for Education to change the status of military children when they have to move to the same as that of looked-after children. The Minister said that it can sometimes be a four-month wait, but several families have come to me for whom it was six or eight weeks to deployment. In those cases, there is not only no time to get their lives in order and sort themselves out, but invariably the wife was doing most of the work because her husband was serving, although in one case the wife was a serving member of the armed forces. It is incredibly difficult, and the challenge with civilian schools is that people cannot apply for a school unless they have a house, and they cannot get a house until they know where they are going, and the Department can only move them so fast when they have a six-week window to go from one deployment to another.

There is progress, but I urge the Minister to push the Department for Education further to take this on. It involves a change of regulations, not primary legislation, and it would make a dramatic difference to a very small number of families who get very short-term deployments in the middle of the school year and whose children are just left out in the cold. Not this September but last, there was a statistic that showed that more than 70 children were still not in school in November because they had special needs and a place could not be found for them in the new location.

Mrs Moon: One of the other issues is the lack of understanding when families are not in community-based schools with a lot of military families but are isolated. Schools do not necessarily understand the additional stressors and tensions in families where the father, mother, or sometimes both, is on deployment. Is there not also work to do with schools to understand the additional tensions and problems of our young children when their families are away and to help them, particularly at times of stress such as during exams, to ensure that their education does not suffer?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is great to see in this year’s report that more guidance is going to schools with the service pupil premium funding to help teachers understand some of the particular needs of those children. I am lucky enough to have an RAF base in my constituency, and Longhoughton school, the local school next to the base at RAF Boulmer, has an extraordinary cohort of teachers. Military children make up 80% of the school, so teachers’ knowledge, understanding and ability to spot a child under stress because their parents are having to move—a lot of them deploy out to the Falklands for six months—are extraordinary. When there are schools that understand because they see a lot of these children, we need to draw out that knowledge and share it. The hon. Lady is right, these children can land anywhere in the country at any point.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talked with great insight about accommodation and how DIO is making progress. This year has seen a fantastic investment of £68 million in housing, which is incredibly welcome, but for me the missing link is still the fact that DIO is working in a silo. The body that looks after the housing should have an understanding of the retention problems and the realities that a wife will run out of steam and her husband will leave service because the house is just too difficult to live in. That understanding should be linked directly to DIO’s thinking patterns so that it invests, because the loss of the incredibly expensive investment in personnel is a bad swap for a £10,000 kitchen or fixing a leaking window or one that does not lock. Those are the frustrations that drive retention problems, and they could be resolved if DIO had much more direct contact at a practical level that it was expected to follow up with investment. I encourage the Minister to keep pushing at that door. It will require a change in DIO’s terms of reference to achieve the change.

Colleagues have spoken at length about mental ill health, and the challenges we face. The trick to help this unravel and help the NHS to make progress is identifying the markers of veterans. Medical records are working much better.

James Heappey: Before my hon. Friend moves on to veterans, let me say that she has been an amazing champion for armed forces families during her time in this place. May I add to the list of challenges for armed forces families that she has so brilliantly explained? Spousal employment, and the role the military can play in helping spouses to find employment as their other halves are being posted, are key factors in the morale of armed forces families.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Businesses underestimate the value of the incredible workforce that can be provided by a military base close by, the effort that these extraordinary people, mostly women, will put in and their commitment to anything. An Army wife is a committed person who will work as hard as she can, even if she is going to be there for only two years. I have met many for whom it has been a frustration, and they take jobs at a lower level than their qualifications afford because they will only be there two years. Businesses fail to take the most advantage of the incredible resource that is on their doorstep. I know that
the Department is looking to work on that in the coming year, and that it is one of its targets. I will be encouraging the Department in that, and I urge my hon. Friend to do the same.

We talk about ill health and veterans, and about the charities that support veterans’ needs. It is great to see the covenant fund being invested in and having a more open perspective than it has had in the past, but the challenge is for those small charities and social enterprises that do great work in the local community. I have two. Forward Assist, in the north-east, is wonderful, and helps with isolation and bringing veterans back into the workplace. Another wonderful charity is Forgotten Veterans UK, set up by an amazing veteran, Gary Weaving. It will formally open its new project at Fort Cumberland down in Portsmouth next week, and I am honoured to be a part of that. The charities help veterans with very simple tools, but they cannot access funding. They are sent the veterans who need that on the ground, day-to-day, gritty support, but they are not really getting any funding to help. We need to look at that more closely.

Bob Stewart: PTSD Resolution is a very small charity that has an incredible impact. It does not pay anyone anything, and any money it receives it uses for treatment. It is run by Colonel Tony Gauvain, my old commanding officer, so I declare an interest, but I ask the House to please support PTSD Resolution. It does great work.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: There are many such charities that do specific, targeted work, and we need to try to chip away to give them the support they need to provide that.

In all these things, the question is carrot and stick. The covenant was set up to drive forward this moral obligation for all the organisations and for all of us to pick up. However, as I said to the Minister last week, I question whether the carrot is enough, and ask whether we need a stick. Do we need to create some sort of covenant ombudsman, so that if someone is having NHS issues and cannot find a solution there is always someone with an independent voice to go to? It is not only unfair to ask the MOD to pick up a lot of the stuff and try to sort it out. Is marking one’s own homework the right solution if we believe in our veterans and military families? They do not have unions. They serve our country selflessly and put their lives on the line, and they do not have an independent voice. They rely on us as MPs, and often that does not fit the problem. I call on the Minister to continue the conversation about how to create an independent ombudsman for those who find that the system does not support them as it should.

2.28 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak and to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is an admirable champion for armed forces personnel, veterans and their families. It is a privilege to have shared in a small way in the work she has done on this issue.

We will have to constrain our contributions this afternoon for reasons outside your control, Madam Deputy Speaker, and outside the Minister’s and mine. I fully appreciate the opportunity to put forward a voice for Northern Ireland at a time when we give a disproportionately higher percentage of our population to the armed forces—higher than anywhere else in this United Kingdom—but also a disproportionately higher percentage served by the implementation of the armed forces covenant. That is why it is important for me to contribute to the debate.

I accept fully the sincere commitment the Minister has given and is giving to the implementation of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland. It is a genuinely felt belief of mine that the Minister sincerely wishes to resolve some of the outstanding and ongoing issues about full implementation in Northern Ireland.

This is such an important issue that we included it within the confidence—and supply agreement. However, when we look through this armed forces covenant report, and consider through-life support for armed forces veterans, we see on page 98 reference to the support we give veterans in England; on page 101, reference to the support we give veterans in Scotland; and on page 102, reference to the support we give veterans in Wales. Where is the page on Northern Ireland? Where is the part of this document about the support we give veterans in Northern Ireland? It is not there.

I have raised on the Floor of this House before the Border Force—or border farce—issue that has affected veterans seeking to serve their country in that regard. Anywhere else in the United Kingdom, someone can satisfy the eligibility criteria through their military service; in Northern Ireland, Border Force scrapped that proposal. It did so on the basis of an erroneous understanding of advice given by the Equality Commission. The Equality Commission merely said, “You have to justify your actions if it disproportionately impacts one side of the community or another.” Border Force—an agency of our Government, responsible to a Whitehall Department—decided not to justify why someone’s service within our armed forces should satisfy eligibility criteria. In the thrust and the vein of the armed forces covenant, that is a disgrace. Now Border Force is facing legal challenge from a former member of the armed forces who happens to come from the Roman Catholic community but is being denied the chance to serve his country because of his religion. Border Force cited protections for him and his community, yet it is using those very protections to frustrate that gentleman’s ability to serve his country. That is not okay.

On two separate occasions, for two years in a row, I have had to challenge veterans Ministers in the Defence Committee and say, “It’s great that we have armed forces champions in local government, but, our local government in Northern Ireland has no role or responsibility in housing or in health, or any of the issues through which the champion process makes a big difference.” In October 2016, I brought correspondence to the Defence Committee that stated, up-front and full-square, that the armed forces covenant does not apply in Northern Ireland. That was wrong, but it was the policy direction being set by the Minister of Health at that time, Michelle O’Neill. It was a disgrace. That is why it is crucial that when we consider the implementation of the armed forces covenant, the Minister has to consider placing a statutory duty on Departments and our public services throughout this United Kingdom. This cannot rest at the will or the whim of any Minister in charge at any given time, because to allow it to be within their grip,
poisoned by their political ideology at any given time, is a true disservice to service personnel who served us so well.

The Minister has mentioned the veterans support officer who has been appointed. I know that the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland is doing tremendous work to try to navigate its way behind the scenes through the labyrinthine problems that we have in Northern Ireland. I am concerned that the funding that has been made available to them comes from LIBOR, that there is no sustainability of funding, that they are only just getting going, and that they are trying to work without full political support—the full intervention and the full weight of Government behind them. Yet they continue admirably.

I hope that in the coming months the Minister will be able to take the opportunity to think about how he profiles resource properly for veterans’ support in Northern Ireland, including extending it further. How does he recognise that we as a country still owe a duty to the significant number of service personnel whom we get from the Irish Republic? The armed forces covenant does not apply at all to those in the Republic of Ireland, and why should it? Yet those veterans who have served this country and have returned to their home nation have to pay for themselves to travel into the UK to avail themselves of these services. Their service was exactly the same; the sacrifice they were prepared to make was exactly the same. We are going to have to consider that in the months to come.

These progress reports, I accept entirely, show a continual development of the covenant commitment to our service personnel. It is a continually improving picture. But until we grasp the nettle of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998—until national Government believe that we need to and should amend section 75 to include veterans as a specific classification of individuals who should be protected in equality law—we will never fully realise the commitment that we have made.

I was going to talk about war widows, but the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has admirably delivered all the points that needed to be made on that subject, save to say that the principle of the argument has been won with regard to those who have not had their pensions reinstated as a consequence of marriage. The way they are treated is a stain on how we have not had their pensions reinstated as a consequence of marriage. The way they are treated is a stain on how we think about how we treat the honour and the value of their former loved ones. I hope that the Minister will turn his attention to resolving and removing that stain in the weeks to come.

2.35 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow my friend from across the water, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). I want to talk about what my constituency—the community that I represent—is doing to implement the armed forces covenant at a local level and to pay tribute to and do right by veterans locally by repaying the debt we owe them.

My local authority, East Renfrewshire Council, works in partnership with two other neighbouring authorities in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire to ensure that our armed forces personnel and veterans want to come to stay in the area because they know that if they come to live there, they will be with a local authority that has them at the heart of the services that they provide. It co-ordinates access to housing—the home-less services, and provides social care, welfare benefits, literacy support, and referrals on to statutory models. Through our local community covenant, the council safeguards the healthcare of armed forces personnel by ensuring that they are known to our local healthcare professionals as well as to local NHS specialist services.

Those who have served in the armed forces also have access to our veterans gateway—a consortium of expert organisations specific to the AFC who all offer different support to those in need. North of the border, one particular important partner is PoppyScotland, which offers incredible support to the AFC through their many branches, including, in particular, the armed services advice project, which is provided by Citizens Advice nationally throughout Scotland. That programme is embodied by East Renfrewshire Citizens Advice Bureau in Barrhead, which offers advice on housing, benefits, debt, and much more. Importantly, PoppyScotland also offers respite breaks for families, and employability services that support the family as a whole. Other Members have touched on issues for families, and that key part of the programme is extremely important.

There are over half a million veterans in Scotland, of all ages, many of them embattled by homelessness, unemployment, loneliness and other complex issues. For all that there are these great services out there, many particularly vulnerable veterans do not engage with services unless they have somebody in whom they have confidence to go with them. As a result, many miss vital appointments, which, in turn, impacts negatively on many aspects of their life.

I really want to pay tribute to an organisation called Fares4Free, which was set up by David Gibson in 2016, and offers much-needed transport assistance to veterans. It provides free transport by asking taxi drivers to give up to four free fares a month to help veterans to access important services and combat loneliness. It has paired this project with a campaign to provide wheelchair-accessible vehicles staffed by trained ex-service personnel. It also provides drivers trained in mental health first aid to transport, accompany and support veterans, building up friendships and sharing confidences.

When I became a Member of Parliament and went to the Coming Home Centre in Govan—which is not in East Renfrewshire but just across the boundary in Glasgow—I was really surprised by how many gaps there were. A public who honour and value their armed services, as they do, would be shocked to know the extent to which they still require volunteers to get second-hand furniture, and to dip into their own pockets to go to the supermarket, so that a veteran has a bed to sleep on and milk in the fridge.

The AFC is fantastic, but in and of itself it is not enough—what matters is whether it is being implemented on the ground. I very much welcome the great steps taken by this Government and the progress update today, but we still have quite a long way to go before we can really give ourselves a pat on the back.

2.39 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): My constituency sits between Carver barracks to the west and Colchester garrison to the east, and while it has a fair few veterans
and military families within its geography, it does not have the critical mass to result in the organic wraparound support provided in a more condensed military environment. I am pleased to say, however, that, because of the armed forces covenant, Braintree District Council has fully implemented a series of changes that prioritise the military and military families in the allocation of social housing. It has worked with both Colchester Council and Tendring Council to fund, through the AFC, a project manager to support military families.

It is incredibly important, as we move from an era of very intense military operations, and as the tempo of military commitments thankfully reduces, that we do not allow the level of public awareness and support to see a corresponding reduction. Warrant Officer Class One Glenn Haughton, who was until recently the Army Sergeant Major, the most senior warrant officer in the British Army, summed it up brilliantly when he said that veterans needed not sympathy but empathy, and that they did not want, and should not have, pity, but they absolutely should have support and understanding.

I am sure we are all partially familiar with the Kipling poem, “Tommy Atkins”, and know that, in the abstract, we are terribly supportive of our service personnel and, by extension, their families. We have already heard mention of a number of service charities, including Care after Combat, which has, as one of its principals, my former honorary colonel, General Freddie Viggers. Service charities do fantastic work for those armed forces personnel who are perhaps a little harder to love—the ones who have fallen into criminality, or perhaps addiction and alcoholism, and who need our support just as much as anybody else.

I will finish my brief remarks with one final point. We must always remember that the families of our service personnel are not just chattels, not a problem to be mitigated and worked around, but an essential element and moral component of our fighting power. They are a positive, and deserve our respect, admiration and support, and I am pleased to say that through the armed forces covenant we are seeing that, but I would suggest that this should be a constant watching brief for the whole of Government.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

James Cleverly: I think I would get a very stern look if I gave way to my right hon. Friend, so unfortunately I will not.

2.42 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I begin by echoing and reinforcing the earlier comments of the Chair of the Defence Select Committee when he congratulated my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) on becoming president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. It is an excellent tribute to her, but it is also good for this country, and I am glad that we are all united in supporting her in that position.

This has been an important debate, not least because it comes 100 years after the end of the first world war. It is important to reflect that when those brave men and women came back from different parts of the world—not just Europe—they did not find in this country a land fit for heroes. There was a lack of support for so many men and women. Lessons were learned, but it took a long time. They were learned during the ’20s and ’30s and after the second world war, but only recently have we had the explicit support provided through the armed forces covenant. I am proud that much of the preparation was done under a previous Labour Government if implemented by the Conservatives.

It is important, too, that we recognise how important and significant is the report before us today. It is important because it contains the observations of the covenant reference group, whose involvement in the process is extremely important.

We have heard today from a number of hon. Members. The last to speak was the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly). He reminded us how important it is that we have this covenant and debate. We heard from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), the Chair of the Select Committee, who spoke eloquently about the desperate plight and unfairness of the situation faced by many war widows. I hope very much that the Government address that situation. We heard from the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) about the particular situation in Northern Ireland and from the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). I echo their support for the covenant.

It is clear from this debate and report that the implementation of the laudable principles in the covenant is uneven and varies between different parts of the country. I hope for a degree of uniformity before too long so that service personnel and veterans might have the equal support through the country that they deserve. I would cite the situation in Wales. All the local authorities bar one are very involved in the provision of the services that the covenant calls for, and I hope that Powys will join the other local authorities to ensure comprehensive coverage in all of Wales.

My own area, Caerphilly, is a shining example. Armed forces awards are being given tonight in Wales, and I am sure that Caerphilly will loom large among the recipients, because excellent work is being done there on the education of veterans’ children and on employment opportunities. There is a particular focus, however, on homelessness, as is common throughout many parts of the country. Caerphilly has appointed a first-rate regional armed forces covenant officer, who covers not only Caerphilly but other parts of Gwent, and we have a first-rate community covenant champion in Councillor Andrew Whitcombe. That model has been replicated elsewhere, but Caerphilly is a good example for others to follow.

It is important, too, that we recognise that we are not just talking about veterans when we talk about the covenant, important though they are. We are talking about those serving currently, as is made explicit in the covenant. One of the big concerns I am aware of is that the armed forces are still not satisfied with the quality of accommodation on many parts of the armed forces estate. This point was made very clearly by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). It is very important that we heed the comments from the Defence Select Committee. It has been extremely critical—quite rightly, in my view—of the agreement with Annington Homes, which was clearly delivering substandard accommodation for our personnel.
That is still a problem; it is not just a historical one. It is noticeable that in the annual report, the armed forces families federations are cited as still being critical of the standard of single living accommodation. It is important to recognise the concern over the last few months about the liquidation of Carillion. Those difficulties continue, and I hope that the MOD will learn the lessons from that kind of outsourcing.

This is an important report, and I hope that Members will take time to read it from cover to cover. Although much has been done, much more needs to be done. I am delighted that there is political consensus on both sides of the House that support for our veterans and armed forces should be vital in our approach to political engagement, whether we are on the right, left or centre. I hope that that bipartisan approach continues and is reinforced, and that a clear message goes out from the House of Commons that we are firmly behind veterans and the armed forces generally.

I would like the Minister, in the brief time available, to seek to allay concerns that many people have about the proposals we believe are in the pipeline to outsource veterans’ services. We believe that that would be a mistake. I would also like him to clarify what exactly the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust will mean for changes in financing. A number of Members have referred to Care after Combat and its belief that it will be excluded from future funding. If that were the case, it would be a huge tragedy. I ask the Minister to specifically address those points. I would like to finish by reiterating the point I made earlier: we stand firmly behind the veterans and armed forces of this country.

2.50 pm

Mr Ellwood: It is a pleasure to conclude this important debate on the support for the armed forces covenant. I notice that there are a few more Members in the Chamber than there were when I opened the debate. I am sorry that they did not have an opportunity to participate in it, but they are most welcome. In the short time available to me until I am upstaged, I will try to respond to Members’ questions.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), spoke about the future accommodation model. She is aware that it has been delayed. I am sorry to hear that. I will write to her, and indeed to all colleagues, with the answers that I cannot provide in the short time available to me until I am upstaged, I will try to respond to Members’ questions.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West spoke about the importance of accommodation and the problems we have had with Annington Homes. I appreciate that. I recognise that 95% of our accommodation does meet the decent homes standard. However, there is more that we can do.

My good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who did so much in her role as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Defence Secretary, raised a number of important issues, not least to do with having a national conversation about the work we do in supporting our armed forces. She also made the interesting proposal of having an ombudsman. If I may, I would like to discuss that further with her.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) spoke about some of the issues. I have promised to come back to Belfast to discuss these matters in more detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Brantseat (James Cleverly) talked about the importance of working with councils. That is critical for the work that we do.

Mr Ellwood: I was about to get offended. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Leed North West spoke about the importance of accommodation and the problems we have had with Annington Homes. I appreciate that. I recognise that 95% of our accommodation does meet the decent homes standard. However, there is more that we can do.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry, I will not give way. If I have time, I will give way shortly.

I am pleased to present the report on the armed forces covenant. The covenant is making a real difference, but we need to do more in scrutinising our support for the armed forces community. First, whether in helping a child into school, getting personnel on to the housing ladder or, indeed, getting better data when it comes to understanding the number of suicides that have taken place, there is room for improvement. That includes better joined-up work between organisations and stakeholders, not least with the private sector and the public sector. It is important that there are no gaps.
Secondly, it is important that we maintain momentum in pressing partners to play their part in progressing the work of the armed forces champions and, indeed, getting more businesses—we now have over 3,000—to sign up to the covenant. I would love to get to a point where, when waiting to board an aircraft, I heard the announcement, “In appreciation for their service, would all armed forces veterans please have the honour of boarding our aircraft first?”

Finally—this point was raised a number of times in the Chamber—we need to transform perceptions about what our military personnel actually offer, and to bury the myths that are falsely perpetuated about our armed forces personnel being broken by their service.

A mark of professionalism is not just how we equip our armed forces on the frontline, but how we look after them when they are back home—the housing, the education of children and the health requirements—and our duty of care once they depart. That is why we have an armed forces covenant. In considering that, let us consider not just the last generation who have served or the current generation who are serving, but the next generation whom we are inspiring to sign up to our armed forces.

From where I stand, the world is getting more dangerous and more complex. As Britain aspires to continue to play a role on the international stage, we must retain our full spectrum capability. This is not just about hardware; it is also about people. It is about honouring our covenant commitments and allowing us to retain skills, so that we can continue to be the most professional armed force in the world. In that spirit, I commend the report on the armed forces covenant to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant.

2.58 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on our negotiations to leave the European Union.

Last week, I set out the details of the draft withdrawal agreement, which will ensure our smooth and orderly departure when we leave the European Union on 29 March next year. I also updated the House on the outline political declaration that set out a framework for the future relationship we want between the UK and the EU.

Last night, I met President Juncker in Brussels to work through the details of the full political declaration on this future relationship. We had good discussions, in which I was clear about what we need to ensure the best possible deal for the United Kingdom. We then tasked our negotiating teams to work through the remaining issues. As a result, the text of the political declaration has now been agreed between the UK and the European Commission, and I updated the Cabinet on that progress this morning.

The draft text that we have agreed with the Commission is a good deal for our country and for our partners in the EU. It honours the vote of the British people by taking back control of our borders, our laws and our money, while protecting jobs, security and the integrity of our precious United Kingdom. It ends free movement once and for all. Instead, we will introduce a new skills-based immigration system that is based not on the country people come from, but on what they can contribute to the UK. The draft text ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK. We will make our own laws in our own Parliaments, here in Westminster and in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and they will be adjudicated on by UK courts. It means an end to sending vast sums of money to the EU, so we can take full control of our money to spend on priorities, including our long-term plan for the NHS, to which we have committed to spending over £3.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24. Just this morning, I was able to announce a major new investment in primary and community care worth £3.5 billion a year in real terms by 2023-24.

The text we have now agreed would create a new free trade area with the European Union, with no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions. That would be the first such agreement between the EU and any advanced economy in the world, which will be good for jobs. The EU said that the choice was binary—Norway or Canada—but the political declaration recognises that there is a spectrum, with the extent of our commitments taken into account in deciding the level of checks and controls. Crucially, the text we have agreed also has an explicit reference to the development of an independent trade policy by the UK beyond this partnership with the European Union, so we would have the ability to sign new trade deals with other countries, and capitalise on the opportunities in the fastest-growing economies around the world. We would be able to get on with that, negotiating deals during the implementation period and putting them in place immediately afterwards.

The deal would mean that we leave the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, so let me be absolutely clear about what that would mean for fishing. We would become an independent coastal
now at stake. We have an agreed text between the UK and the European Commission. The text is today being shared with the leaders of the other 27 member states ahead of the special EU Council on Sunday. The negotiations are now at a critical moment and all our efforts must be focused on working with our European partners to bring this process to a final conclusion in the interests of all our people.

Last night, I spoke to Prime Minister Sánchez of Spain. We have been working constructively with the Governments of Spain and Gibraltar in the negotiations on the withdrawal agreement. We want this work to continue in the future relationship. But I was absolutely clear that Gibraltar’s British sovereignty will be protected and that the future relationship we agree must work for the whole UK family. Today, I met Chancellor Kurz of Austria, which currently holds the EU’s presidency, and later today and tomorrow, I will be speaking to other European leaders ahead of returning to Brussels on Saturday.

The British people want Brexit to be settled. They want a good deal that sets us on a course for a brighter future. And they want us to come together as a country and to move on to focus on the big issues at home, like our NHS. The deal that will enable us to do this is now within our grasp. In these crucial 72 hours ahead, I will do everything possible to deliver it for the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

3.7 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement. These 26 pages are a testament to the failure of the Tory’s bungled negotiations: 19 extra pages, but nothing has changed. The only certainty contained within these pages is that the transition period will have to be extended or we will end up with a backstop and no exit. It represents the worst of all worlds: no say over the rules that will continue to apply and no certainty for the future. There is no change to the withdrawal agreement, no unilateral pull-out mechanism, no concessions on the backstop, which would create a new regulatory border down the Irish sea. Did the EU not receive the amendments and improvements promised by the Leader of the House?

A little over a year ago, we were confidently told by the Government that by the end of the article 50 period we would have a trade deal. The International Trade Secretary said it would the “easiest in human history”. Instead, we have 26 pages of waffle. This empty document could have been written two years ago. It is peppered with phrases such as “the parties will look at” and “the parties will explore”. What on earth have the Government been doing for the past two years? They have managed less than one page a month since the referendum.

The Prime Minister said that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. It is clear from this document that, indeed, nothing is agreed. This is the blindfold Brexit we all feared—a leap in the dark. It falls short of Labour’s six tests. [Interruption.] This Government could have negotiated a new comprehensive customs union, giving certainty to business and securing the manufacturing industry and manufacturing industry jobs. Instead, they are more interested in dog-whistling on immigration. I hope—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. When the Prime Minister delivered her statement, she delivered it to a largely attentive and courteous House. I could not care less what somebody, largely inadequately and certainly irrelevantly, chuntered from a sedentary position. The Prime Minister was heard in courtesy. The right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition will likewise be heard in courtesy. If it requires the process to take a bit longer, so be it. If it requires it to take a lot longer, so be it. If it takes several hours, so be it. So give up, be quiet, behave—on both sides—and let us hear people speak.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope the Prime Minister will abandon the poisonous and divisive rhetoric about EU nationals jumping the queue. European Union nationals have contributed massively to this country, across all industry and public services, while this Government and this Prime Minister as Home Secretary built a hostile environment for non-EU immigrants.

Chequers has been chucked. There is no common rulebook and no mention of frictionless trade. Our participation is downgraded in a number of European agencies, or we are out of them in their entirety. After more than two years of negotiations, there is no clarity over our status with a range of European-wide agencies—the Erasmus scheme, the Galileo project, Euratom, the European Medicines Agency, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Agency. On none of these do we know our final status.

Take, for example, section 107 of the document. It says:

“The Parties should consider appropriate arrangements for cooperation on space.”

Well, what a remarkable negotiating achievement that is! After two years, they are going to consider “appropriate arrangements”. This is waffle—the blindfold Brexit of a Government that spent more time arguing with themselves than negotiating for Britain.

On fisheries, the Prime Minister and the Environment Secretary have been saying that Britain will leave the common fisheries policy and become an independent coastal nation, yet this agreement sets an aspiration to establish a new fisheries agreement on access to waters and quota shares by summer 2020. That sounds to me like we are replacing membership of the common fisheries policy with a new common fisheries policy. It is clear—that during what will now inevitably be an extended transition period, there will be no control of our money, our laws and our borders, or indeed, of fishing stocks for a very long time to come.

The Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that a deal had been agreed between the UK and the European Commission and that it was now up to the EU27. Until this Parliament has debated and voted, there is no UK agreement. This half-baked deal is the product of two years of botched negotiations in which the Prime Minister’s red lines have been torn up, Cabinet resignations have been raked up and Chequers has been chucked. This is a vague menu of options, not a plan for the future and not capable of bringing our country together.

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that in virtually everything he said in his response to my statement, he could not have been more wrong. Indeed, I did not believe that he had actually even read the political declaration that we have published today, as with the withdrawal agreement. He did quote one sentence, I think in an attempt to suggest that he had actually read the document. He said that it was an example of lack of detail. Perhaps if he had read some of the other aspects of the document, he would know that there is significant detail in it.

The declaration refers to “no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors”. No other major economy has that. It refers to “liberalisation in trade in services well beyond the Parties’...WTO...commitments and building on recent Union...FTAs”. It refers to “equivalence decisions” on financial services. It refers to “a Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement”, and to “reciprocal arrangements for timely, effective and efficient exchanges of Passenger Name Records...of DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data”. It refers to enabling “the United Kingdom to participate on a case by case basis in” common security and defence policy “missions and operations”. There is plenty more—I could go on—but I think the right hon. Gentleman is beginning to get the message about this.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about where he thought that somehow we had not achieved any changes. Let me be clear about some of those changes. I referred to at least one of them in my statement. The EU said that the choice was binary: Norway or Canada. The political declaration concedes that there is a spectrum. It says that “the extent of our commitments...would be taken into account” in deciding the levels of “checks and controls”. The EU said that we could not share security capabilities as a non-member state outside Schengen area. The political declaration grants us direct access to some, and promises to enable many others. Those are further commitments than the EU has made to any non-member state. The EU said that we could not preserve the invisible customs border between Northern Ireland and Ireland without splitting our customs territory. The withdrawal agreement maintains the integrity of the UK’s customs territory. Again, I could go through some further points.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about the common fisheries policy. This is where I began to think that maybe he had read the document but not understood it, or what lies behind it. If we are to ensure that we are able to continue to have access to the waters of other European Union member states, as we do at the moment, we will need to negotiate, as other non-EU member states do, an annual agreement on access to waters between the UK and the European Union. The point at the moment is that we are not able to do that as an independent coastal state, and in the future we will be able to do that as an independent coastal state.

I must also say to the right hon. Gentleman that what I have been doing throughout this process is looking at what are the best interests of the United Kingdom. Let us just go through his other challenge to this: the six Labour tests on Brexit.

“Does it ensure a strong and collaborative future relationship with the EU?”
Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes.

“Does it ensure the fair management of migration in the interests of the economy and communities?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes.

“Does it defend rights and protections and prevent a race to the bottom?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes.

“Does it protect national security and our capacity to tackle cross-border crime?”

Hon. Members: No!

The Prime Minister: Yes, it does. [Interruption.] “Does it deliver”—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Mahmood, we do not need you gesticulating. You are not a football referee or a linesperson. Calm yourself, man. The Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Does it ensure that it delivers a deal that is good for every part of the UK? Yes, it does.

Let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is a good deal for the United Kingdom. It delivers on the vote of the British people. It brings back control of our borders, our money and our laws. It protects jobs, it protects security, it protects the integrity of the United Kingdom. The right hon. Gentleman may want to play party politics; I am working in the national interest.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I of course appreciate enormously my right hon. Friend’s huge endeavours to deal with what has now emerged as a particularly toxic issue: the Northern Irish backstop, now bound into the withdrawal agreement. However, for all that effort and work, the reality is that this is not the withdrawal agreement, and the withdrawal agreement will make it very clear that should we, even under these terms, struggle with a backstop as it exists at the moment. That means that we automatically fall into the backstop described in the withdrawal agreement.

Secondly, there are many instances in the document—I will not go through the full list—where it is clear that that arrangement, whether the extension of the IP, an alternative arrangement, or a backstop, is there for a temporary period before we are able to put the future relationship in place. What the backstop and those alternative arrangements and the proposals amount to are what I think my right hon. Friend was talking about at the end of his question, which is our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and that they will be able to carry on their business much as they do today. That, I hope, is what we are all striving to achieve in relation to this matter. There are a number of ways in which we can achieve that, as the withdrawal agreement and political declaration make clear, and we are working on all of them.

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

This Government really are spluttering forward in a haphazard, chaotic way. There are of course outstanding political concerns still to be addressed by the EU27 this Sunday. Central to this political declaration remains the matter of fishing rights—a matter critical to Scotland. A week ago, Scottish Conservative Members in this place wrote to the Prime Minister and said:

“At the end of the Implementation Period, we must be able to negotiate access and quota shares with the EU and other third countries independently...This means that access and quota shares cannot be included in the Future Economic Partnership.”

Paragraph 75 of the political declaration agreed today states:

“Within the context of the overall economic partnership the Parties should establish a new fisheries agreement on, inter alia, access to waters and quota shares.”

There we have it: Scotland’s fishing community is once again a bargaining chip used by a Tory Government in Brussels.

Worse, the detail in the draft withdrawal agreement has pitted fishing against aquaculture—access to waters versus access to trade-making plain once again that Scottish interests are expendable. When the UK entered the then European Economic Community, under the leadership of Ted Heath, the Conservatives traded away our fishing rights, and they have done so continuously since then. Scotland’s fishing rights—thrown overboard as though they were discarded fish. So much for taking back control; more like trading away Scotland’s interests.

This is an absolute dereliction of the promises Scottish Conservative Members and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs made to Scotland. Shame on them! Will the Prime Minister tell the House if her Scottish MPs and Secretary of State have agreed to this political declaration? Is it not the case that she has just lost further critical votes on the deal, because the Scottish Tory MPs could not possibly vote in favour of this sell-out of Scottish fishing interests?
The Prime Minister: I think it will help the right hon. Gentleman if I repeat what I said in the statement. We will become an independent coastal state with control over our waters, so our fishermen get a fairer share of the fish in our waters. We have firmly rejected a link between access to our waters and access to markets. The fisheries agreement is not something we will be trading off against any other priorities. We are clear that we will negotiate access and quotas on an annual basis, as do other independent coastal states such as Norway and Iceland. [Interruption.] The right hon. Gentleman may choose to shout at me from a sedentary position, but I have to say that he devoted all his response to my statement in—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand that the right hon. Gentleman adheres very strongly to his position—it is in the nature of holding an opinion. But he must hear the response from the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Gentleman devoted all his response to the issue of fishing. He is sitting there chuntering that this is a sell-out of Scottish fishermen. I will tell him what a sell-out of Scottish fishermen would be: the policy of the Scottish nationalists to stay in the common fisheries policy.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that this declaration is self-contradictory in that it insists on the sovereignty of both the EU and the United Kingdom legal orders, and that without control of our own laws and by surrendering to binding rules of the European Court, this declaration cannot be reconciled with the repeal of the 1972 Act or with the referendum vote? Will she further note that the European Scrutiny Committee has resolved to hold an inquiry into the Government’s handling and the outcome of these negotiations?

The Prime Minister: This political declaration asserts the sovereignty of both sides of the agreement—the United Kingdom and the European Union—because that is exactly what will persist. We will be a sovereign nation. We will no longer be under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. There are circumstances where a point that is being looked at—for example, in arbitration—is considered to be a matter of the interpretation of European Union law. There is one body that interprets European Union law: that is the European Court of Justice. What we make clear is that, in those circumstances, the arbitration panel may ask the European Court of Justice for an opinion on the interpretation of European Union law; the arbitration panel will then consider its decision in the light of that opinion.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for her movement in paragraphs 26 and 27, taking on board our proposals to use on the Irish border modern techniques and processes used elsewhere, but—there is a big but in this—as long as the backstop exists in a legally binding document, there is a danger that, should talks fail, the backstop becomes accepted and we have the horror of being in the customs union, the horror of Northern Ireland being split off under a different regime. As I saw in Washington this week, if we cannot control our tariffs and our regulatory regime, we cannot do free trade deals with other countries. At this late stage, will she consider withdrawing the backstop from the legally binding draft document and replacing it with the draft trade facilitation chapter and border protocol that we gave her earlier in the week, and making that legally binding so it could become the new backstop?

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) for the work they have been doing on this issue.

In the withdrawal agreement we negotiated a specific reference to alternative arrangements that enables us to work up those alternative arrangements such that they will be, as the name suggests, an alternative to the arrangements for the backstop, or would enable us to come out of the backstop if we had started down that route.

I continue to say to my hon. and right hon. Friends, and to Members of this House more widely, that it is the firm determination of this Government, and indeed it is the determination of the European Union, that we will work to ensure that we have the future relationship arranged and able to be in place by 1 January 2021. It is not the case that there is a sense in which the backstop is automatic. The backstop is not automatic. There are alternatives to the backstop, and the United Kingdom can choose those alternatives. There are pros and cons to those alternatives and, when the time comes, obviously the choice will measure those pros and cons, but what matters is that it will not be the case that the only way to deal with the interim period is through the backstop; it can be dealt with by alternative arrangements, or by an extension to the implementation period.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): This is essentially an agreement to have an agreement, and it is full of worryingly vague aspirations. How, for example, can the Prime Minister justify paragraph 24, which relates to medicines, chemicals and aviation safety, where we currently have strong agreed co-operative standards? She has managed to negotiate an agreement to “explore the possibility of cooperation”. That is pathetically weak, and it will cause great anxiety to millions of people who depend on high standards of safety.

The Prime Minister: When we leave the European Union we will cease to be a member of certain European Union agencies. The right hon. Gentleman might have noticed that there is a strong reference to close co-operation in the text in relation to the European Aviation Safety Agency, which already permits a third country to have access to the agency. That is not the case with the European Medicines Agency or the European Chemicals Agency, which is why, as we identified in the White Paper published in the summer, it will be necessary to work on what should be the access arrangements to those agencies. The EASA already has a model that can be used, and the other two agencies do not. In relation to these negotiations, we are not able to put legal texts together until we have left the European Union and are no longer a member of the European Union—that, of course, is what we will be able to do when we leave on 29 March 2019.
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): The backstop ties the UK to the customs union and single market rules with no voice and an EU veto on our exit, while paragraph 23 of the political declaration makes that the starting point for future relations to build on. The top reason people voted to leave the EU was to take back democratic control over our laws. Is it not the regrettable but inescapable reality that this deal gives even more away?

The Prime Minister: This is my first opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for the work he did as Brexit Secretary. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very unseemly. Everybody will get a chance to ask a question. The right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) has asked a question and the Prime Minister is answering it. Let us try to show each other some courtesy.

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that I have explained, in response to other right hon. and hon. Members, the point about the backstop—it is not the automatic route for dealing with a temporary period in relation to any gap that exists between the end of the implementation period in December 2020 and the future relationship coming into place. The political declaration is about that future relationship. There are important points that have been agreed within the withdrawal agreement that will ensure that we can get a good agreement in relation to borders and to our trade area when we become that independent state outside the European Union. He will be aware that, as is reflected in this political declaration, there is a spectrum and there is a balance between willingness to abide by rules and the necessity for checks at the border. It continues to be our ambition and our objective to get that frictionless trade at the border, because we believe that is important.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Chancellor of the Exchequer said last night that he did not like the backstop. He said that he does not think that the backstop is a good arrangement for our economy or a good arrangement for our Union. We agree with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the light of the political declaration, in paragraph 27, to which the Prime Minister referred, it is now clear that the EU is beginning to accept that there are alternative arrangements that can be put in place without the need for the backstop. I say to the Prime Minister that if she wants to have the support of my party for the withdrawal agreement, we need to see an end of the backstop and those alternative arrangements put in place.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He started off by reflecting the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As I have said in this Chamber, and as others have said in this Chamber, none of us wants to see the backstop being used. The best way to ensure that the backstop is not used is to get the future relationship into place. There are all those alternative arrangements and we will be working on them, and I am happy to discuss them with the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues what those alternative arrangements could be. But what is important is that we have within the document means by which we can guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland—and from the EU’s point of view it wants that guarantee in relation to Ireland—that trade across the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland can continue as it does today. That is the commitment we have made—no hard border—and that is what we will continue to be committed to providing.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Outside this House there is a much higher appreciation of the tenacity of the Prime Minister in pursuing a successful deal than we sometimes hear inside it. One of the principal worries, as we are hearing, has been that in some way we will be trapped forever, either in the backstop or in a customs union. What is there in this declaration and in the withdrawal agreement to calm those fears?

The Prime Minister: There are several elements that I would suggest to my right hon. Friend would calm those fears. First, there are many statements within the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration that explicitly recognise that the backstop, should it be necessary, would only be a temporary arrangement. Indeed, article 50, which is the legal basis for the withdrawal agreement, cannot establish a permanent relationship. That is reflected in the text and that is accepted by the European Union.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Unlike the withdrawal agreement, this political declaration is not legally binding. Although it may now be 26 pages as opposed to seven, it still does not provide the House with clarity and certainty about our future economic relationship with our biggest, nearest and most important trading partner. Is it really going to take the defeat of her deal to persuade the Prime Minister that she cannot achieve frictionless trade while leaving the customs union and the single market, and that therefore, sooner or later, a different approach is going to have to be found in order to secure the future of our economy and the jobs that depend on it?

The Prime Minister: We have of course put forward proposals that would enable frictionless trade to be achieved outside the customs union and outside the single market. That is not something that is accepted by everyone in the European Union. I fully accept that—but we have in the future negotiations the ability to continue to work for our objective of achieving that frictionless trade. The right hon. Gentleman talks about concern about uncertainty into the future; I have to say to him that the thing that would create most uncertainty in the future is a failure to take and agree a deal that is going to be good for the UK, that delivers on the vote of the people in the referendum, and that does so while protecting people’s jobs and security.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): May I regretfully point out to my right hon. Friend that of course nothing in this political declaration changes the hard reality of the withdrawal agreement, which gives the EU a continuing veto over the unilateral
power of the entire United Kingdom to do free trade deals or to take back control of our laws? May I therefore respectfully suggest that we can accept the generalities and the self-contradictions contained in this political declaration, but we should junk forthwith the backstop upon which the future economic partnership is to be based, according to this political declaration, and which makes a complete nonsense of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will recall the discussions we had earlier in the year when we were agreeing the temporary customs arrangement as our proposal for the basis on which we would ensure that we guaranteed the commitment for the people of Northern Ireland, and, indeed, obviously elements of that have been reflected in what we see in the withdrawal agreement. There are various arrangements that we can put in place, as I have said to others who have questioned me so far in this statement in relation to the backstop. I say to my right hon. Friend that the future relationship that we have set out in the political declaration ends free movement, ends sending vast sums of money to the European Union every year, and ends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice here in the United Kingdom, and it enables us to hold an independent trade policy and to negotiate trade deals around the whole of the world. I know that my right hon. Friend has in the past expressed his desire to have all those elements available to the United Kingdom, and that is what this deal delivers.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): As has been said, this is a declaration of aspiration and a charter for years of uncertainty. It is not the comprehensive free trade deal that the Prime Minister promised we would have before exit day in her Lancaster House speech. Having broken that promise, can she now guarantee that that comprehensive free trade deal will be finalised by the end of the transition period, because so far this gives no certainty whatsoever to our businesses?

The Prime Minister: On the contrary, if the hon. Gentleman looks at the comments that have been made by business in relation to the declaration—that were made, in fact, in relation to the outline political declaration last week—he will see that organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses are very clear about the certainty that is provided for businesses looking into the future. When he looks through the political declaration and, indeed, through the withdrawal agreement, he will also see the firm commitment on both sides to ensuring that we work to put in place that legal text. Yes, it is the case that we cannot have the legal text on the future agreement until we have left the European Union, and one of the elements towards the end of the political declaration, as the hon. Gentleman will have seen, sets out the commitments in relation to working on that for the future. I say to the hon. Gentleman that what is important is that we have here a political declaration that is fuller than the outline that we published last week and that sets out very clearly a deal for the UK that is good for the United Kingdom and good for jobs.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I do not believe that this is a good deal for Britain and I do not think that many young people in our country think that this is a good deal for Britain at all. Does the Prime Minister accept that, if the meaningful vote is lost, and if this House votes also against exiting the EU with no deal, the only right option then is to go back to the people and allow them to have a final say, including young people—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. People should not be shouting out. The right hon. Lady is asking the Prime Minister a question. Have the manners to listen.

Justine Greening: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I think that young people would like to be listened to in this debate as well. I was asking the Prime Minister whether, if the meaningful vote is lost and if this House, as I believe it will, votes against a no-deal exit from the EU, the Government intend to come back with an alternative proposal on how to break the deadlock, and why would that not include going back to the British people to ask them their views?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we have set out in legislation the procedure that would be followed were the meaningful vote to be lost in this House. My right hon. Friend asks about going back to the people in a second referendum. I say to her, as I have said now on many occasions here in this House, that this House and this Parliament overwhelmingly gave the British people the choice as to whether or not to leave the European Union. The people of Britain voted to leave the European Union. I believe that it is important that politicians do not turn around and say, “Well, what do you think now? Would you like to think again?” but say, “You voted to leave and we will deliver that Brexit—that leaving of the European Union.”

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister told us in her concluding remarks that she wants to “move on” to focus on the big issues such as our national health service, but how does she expect to move on when she has signed up to a deal that does nothing for our services sector? Our services sector comprises 80% of our economy and includes things such as retail banks, leisure and tourism. Can she give our country today a guarantee that our UK services sector will enjoy the same access to the single market that it enjoys today?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady looks at the sections that we have on the services sector, she will see that the arrangements we have in the political declaration go beyond any that have been offered to any other non-member of the European Union.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that a number of people I speak to are fully in admiration of the determination that the Prime Minister has shown over these very difficult negotiations, doing something that no other Prime Minister has ever been tasked with doing? Will she explain to the House a little bit more? If this agreement—the 858 pages of the withdrawal agreement and today’s document, which has been agreed with the Commission—is rejected, does she think that the six paragraphs offered by the Opposition are the alternative?

The Prime Minister: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for his opening remarks. Secondly, I say no. The Opposition
have set these six tests, but at no stage have they set out what their plan for an alternative arrangement with the European Union would be.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): When questioned over whether any deal is financially worse than EU membership, the Chancellor said late last night that it is not only about the economics. I have news for the Prime Minister: we say that it is all about the economics. The people can now see that the British Government are swivel-eyed in their determination to rip the UK out of the single market and the customs union. Is it not time to take the deal back to the people and let them decide what matters most?

The Prime Minister: I responded on the issue of the second referendum when I responded to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening). On the question of the economy, this is a deal that protects jobs and livelihoods across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Is not the lesson of this long negotiation that, when you try to unravel yourself from an international rules-based system because you do not like the rules, unless you want chaos, you start creating a completely new set of rules, many of which are in fact as binding and onerous on this country as any that we had before? In that context, the backstop—I have to say this to my right hon. Friend—is a constitutional anomaly of the first order because it makes the EU the guarantor of a bilateral treaty between ourselves and Ireland on which the people have never been consulted. I urge her in those circumstances, if she wants to go ahead with this, to put her deal to the people of this country and to offer them the alternative of remaining, because the one big eye-opener that one sees from all this is that, however hard she has tried, at the end of the day, we will be in an international rules-based system because that in fact is where our national interest lies.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has heard my response about asking the people in a second referendum what their views are. What we have negotiated is an arrangement with the European Union that continues a close partnership between the United Kingdom and the EU. I believe that that is the right thing for us to do and that coming out of the EU will enable us to develop even closer partnerships with other countries around the world through our trade deals and, indeed, through other means of support and the work we will be able to do with them on security and defence. It is also important, given our geographical position and given that the EU is our nearest trading neighbour, that we continue to have that good partnership with the EU, and that is what this delivers.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister now admit that extending the aspirations into a political declaration that is 19 pages longer than the original series of aspirations is not actually a deal? When will she reach a deal so that, when we vote to leave through the withdrawal Act, we will know where we are leaving to? And whatever happened to frictionless trade? It is not mentioned at all in her list of aspirations.

The Prime Minister: The position, as I have mentioned to others, is that it is of course not possible for us to agree the legal text of our future relationship with the European Union until we have left the European Union. If the hon. Lady looks again at the text, she will see that it clearly expresses what we have expressed previously in relation to trade—that there is a spectrum, there is a balance between commitments that are given on rules and the issue of the checks that take place at the border. It remains our intention as a Government to work towards that frictionless trade.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): There are clearly parts of this document that are positive and that I welcome, but my grave worry is that it will never come into effect anyway. The EU is unlikely to agree a new economic partnership with us because the withdrawal agreement locks us into paying the £38 billion and also commits us to a backstop that has us obeying EU rules and applying its customs rules without our having any say in them.

The Prime Minister: I recognise my right hon. Friend’s concern about the backstop, but the reality of the position from the European Union is the complete opposite. There are those in the European Union who actively believe that the backstop would be an advantageous place for the United Kingdom to be—advantageous because, in their eyes, it has that access to the market of the European Union without any payment and without free movement. That is not a position they actively want us to be in. That is why both sides have made it clear throughout the document that we do not want the backstop to come into place at all and that were it to come into place it would only be temporary.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the Prime Minister, because she has managed to satisfy her immigration obsession and to deal with the EU queue jumpers. Is it not the case that what we do to them they will do unto us? Her agreement aims to provide visa-free travel only for short-term visits to the EU. Is it not the case that the rights the Prime Minister and I have enjoyed to live, work and love in a continent of 27 nations will be denied to the next generation of young people?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, what we will be doing in relation to immigration is bringing an end to free movement once and for all. We will have an immigration system based not on where somebody comes from but on the contribution they can make to this economy. That will be good for the whole of the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): May I welcome this political declaration, particularly paragraph 77 on the global co-operation enshrined in this agreement? Does the Prime Minister agree that we must continue to work more closely than ever with our European partners, even when we leave the European Union, on trans-border issues such as climate change, trade protectionism and all the other issues that we have to deal with together and cannot deal with singly?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is important that we have that section in this political declaration. We are leaving the
European Union; we are not leaving Europe. It will make sense for us to continue to co-operate with our European partners on a whole range of issues that affect the whole world and on which our being able to work together will be important in terms of how we can address those issues and resolve them—as he suggests, that includes issues such as climate change.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Poorer, with less control, and years and years of more uncertainty. [Interruption.] In her heart of hearts, does the Prime Minister honestly think that this is what people were voting for two and a half years ago?

The Prime Minister: I think that a number of my colleagues, when the right hon. Gentleman started talking about being poorer and having more uncertainty, thought that he was describing a Labour Government. I think that what people voted for was to bring an end to free movement, and to take control of our borders, our money and our laws, and they wanted us to do it in a way that protected their jobs, protected their security and protected our United Kingdom—and that is exactly what this deal does.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): One of my constituents who was on the other side of the referendum vote has written to me today saying that it appears that the UK’s Brexit requirements are being achieved, or as close to that as is going to be achievable. He wants to applaud the Prime Minister and her team for their negotiation, and says that anyone who votes against this deal would actually be voting against the referendum result and the interests of the country. May I put it to the Prime Minister that I think that is representative of many people in all parties throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing his constituent’s views to the House today. I think that, when every Member of this House looks at the meaningful vote, they will have to ask themselves precisely the question that that constituent has asked—does this deliver on the vote, and does it do it in a way that is good for the United Kingdom? I think the answer is unequivocally yes.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister seems to imply in paragraph 27 that the new facilitative arrangements and technologies to prevent a hard border are new. They have been around for some time, and customs officials—all sorts of people—have written about this. The fact is that the Prime Minister’s team have not looked at this seriously until very recently. Even at this late stage, could I say to the Prime Minister that the backstop has no need to be in a legal agreement, and that it should be taken out and we should get on with getting the kind of changes that would make a hard border impossible?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right that of course there have been ideas around for some time in relation to the way in which customs and the treatment of customs is developing with today’s technology, but there are further technological solutions that I think will be available. On the question of no hard border, we have a commitment to no hard border, but I believe it is important that we also try to work to ensure that businesses and people in Northern Ireland are able to carry on their business and their daily life much as they do today. This is about no hard border but it is also about our overall commitment to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I refer my right hon. Friend to paragraph 134 of the proposal on the question of interpretation of Union law, which gives authority to the Court of Justice of the European Union? Why is there not a similar paragraph giving the right of interpretation of UK law to the UK courts, or is it implicit that European Union law is senior?

The Prime Minister: It is not the case that European Union law is senior. It is the case that we have consistently said, throughout all the negotiations, and made it clear at various points, that the court of one party cannot have jurisdiction over the other party. But the body that interprets European law is the CJEU. As this makes clear, the arbitration panel can decide to ask the CJEU for an opinion on the interpretation of EU law. UK law is interpreted, indeed, by United Kingdom courts. The arbitration panel, when it comes to making its decision—had it referred the ECJ to give an opinion on a matter of European Union law—would take its decision in the light of that opinion.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister knows that this is a complicated and historic time for us all—we are deciding the future of our country—but she also knows that most honest MPs would say, “We haven’t had a chance yet to evaluate this.” She knows, too, that by Sunday many people—the economists, the pundits, the think-tanks—will have evaluated it. If that is possible—and will happen—why can the British people not have the chance to evaluate it properly once they know whether it is a good deal?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He talks about being able to bring a treaty to an end, but it is also important, because we accept that over the years trade relationships will develop and change and that administrative arrangements will change, to have a regular review mechanism in place, so that as those changes take place, it is possible to make changes to the agreement.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Was not the Prime Minister’s fundamental mistake triggering article 50 without getting a commitment to conclude a future trade agreement before exit day? As a result, is she not asking the country to trust her—to
take a leap in the dark—entirely on the basis of this flimsy, unenforceable set of political words? We face year after year of further negotiations. Or can she now tell us when the negotiations on the future trade arrangement will conclude?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has heard me mention in response to other questions the determination and commitment of both sides to ensuring that those negotiations take place such that the future framework is in place at the end of December 2020. He complains that we triggered article 50 when we did. I remind him that the Leader of the Opposition wanted to trigger article 50 the day after the referendum.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI, the vast majority of members of the Institute of Directors and even the Ulster Farmers Union are all saying they support the withdrawal agreement. Should those of us who care about the jobs and economic security of our constituents not support, it too?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. The important thing is that the deal delivers on the vote of the referendum, while protecting jobs and the security and livelihoods of people up and down the country.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we be clear what a deal is and what it is not? A deal is what we have at the moment—I happen to think it is a very good deal. This is simply a piece of paper full of meaningless waffle. It is not legally binding; it has nothing about frictionless trade; it has lots about the ECJ, even though the Prime Minister claims it does not; and it cuts off opportunities for our young people and their futures. The Government Benches behind her are emptying. When will she realise that the only way out of this crisis is by putting it back to the British people in a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman says that what we have now is a deal. What we have now is membership of the European Union, and the British people voted for us to cease that membership and leave the European Union.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome paragraph 53, which talks about “entry and stay for purposes such as research, study, training and youth exchanges”, which is incredibly important for professionals and young people in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that once we leave the common agricultural policy—another important issue in my constituency—we will have as close and as frictionless trade in agricultural goods as possible?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm that. The exchanges that my hon. Friend referred to are indeed important, particularly for young people and young professionals. We will be leaving the common agricultural policy. Obviously, we will be putting in place our alternative proposals for support the agricultural sector, and we will be looking to ensure that we have the ability to move agricultural products and goods across the border as easily as possible.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If the Prime Minister will not apologise to EU citizens for accusing them of queue jumping, I do so on her behalf. To make amends, will she confirm that there are no circumstances in which she will inflict no deal on the country, and will she offer everyone a people’s vote, to get us out of this Brexit quagmire, which she has created?

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Paragraph 23 makes provision for us to be in the single customs territory provided for in the withdrawal agreement. Paragraph 135 states that we could be fined for not following EU law. Which normal independent country has an ambition to enter into that kind of relationship with the European Union? Mexico? Canada? Japan? What other country would want to submit to these kinds of arrangements?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will see that we also say in paragraph 23 that this economic partnership will “ensure no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors, with ambitious customs arrangements”.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): For a £39 billion divorce fee, the British people are being offered the prospect of years, if not decades, of wrangling over sectors such as transport, chemicals and nuclear. The ECJ will be the final arbiter in any decision, with the ability to impose fines on us. The Prime Minister is going to this summit pretending that she can get this deal through Parliament, when she knows she cannot. Is it not time to stop the madness and put this back to the people in a vote, so that they can reject it?

The Prime Minister: In response to the hon. Lady’s final question, I refer her to the answer I have given to other right hon. and hon. Members. There is much else I could say about the other details in her question, but I will simply make this point. This deal does not make the European Court of Justice the final arbiter on any dispute.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): The Prime Minister mentioned that there is an explicit and welcome reference in the document to the UK pursuing an independent trade policy, including the ability to sign new trade deals with the rest of the world. Does that include specifically the ability to conclude free trade agreements?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We will have the opportunity to conclude free trade agreements with countries around the rest of the world. As I hope my right hon. Friend sees, this aspect has been inserted in the full political declaration to make absolutely clear that we will have an independent trade policy.
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): By contrast to the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), I am pleased to see the Prime Minister recognise the role of the European Court of Justice, because this agreement explicitly states that we will not only respect its integrity and agree to binding rulings, but consider financial compensation for when they are broken. Can she tell us a bit more about how she intends to influence the decisions of the ECJ, given the impact that this will have on British businesses and British jobs?

The Prime Minister: What is absolutely clear is that in the future relationship we will have with the European Union, the European Court of Justice will not have jurisdiction here in the United Kingdom. It is possible that the hon. Lady is thinking of the circumstances put in place in the withdrawal agreement in relation to either those cases that are pending in relation to the European Court of Justice and Union law before we leave, or those cases that relate to activity that has taken place under European Union law while we were a member of the European Union, in which case it will be possible for those cases to continue to be taken as they would have been had we remained a member.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on getting alternative arrangements into the narrative, which is a very considerable achievement indeed. Given articles 174 to 178, to what extent does she think that the independent arbitration panel ultimately will be able to determine if and when the conditions for alternative arrangements have been met?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has clearly made a careful study of the withdrawal agreement. He will know from the withdrawal agreement that the process that will take place is that, if we are in the backstop and believe we have alternative arrangements—whether the future relationship or another arrangement—that mean the backstop is no longer necessary, that will be a matter initially to be discussed between the United Kingdom and the European Union through the Joint Committee. It would be possible then, if there were no agreement and there was concern about good faith in relation to this, for that matter to be arbitrable before the arbitration panel. Of course, it is not for me to set out the sort of decision that the arbitration panel will take; it would be for it, at that point in time, to determine whether either side had been failing to act in the way in which it was intended.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): In sector after sector, these proposals represent a downgrading of UK power and influence compared with what we have now. That is one side of the equation here, but I want to ask the Prime Minister about the other side of the equation. Can she look the House in the eye and say that these proposals will make the country economically better off than continuing with our current arrangements?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with the first part of the right hon. Gentleman’s question. I believe that actually, as an independent state outside the European Union, the United Kingdom will continue to play a very key role in a number of multilateral organisations around the world, such as the United Nations and NATO. More than that, we have already started to extend our partnership to countries around the world where we have not had the same extent of partnership as a member of the European Union and to look forward to us outside the European Union. I think the right hon. Gentleman has probably asked me the question about the economics previously. Outside the European Union, I believe it is important for us not only to have a good trade relationship with the European Union—that is what this deal delivers—but to be able to develop those trade relationships around the rest of the world.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Prime Minister help those of us who want to try to help her in this vote? She knows that what we are worried about is that we will be trapped for years in a customs union. She tells us that this backstop is temporary, so can she give me this commitment? Given that the Vienna convention makes it absolutely clear that a sovereign state can abrogate any part of a treaty with an international body when it likes and that this Parliament cannot bind its successors, if by the end of this Parliament—or the due date of the end of this Parliament—or by 1 January 2022, we are still trapped in the backstop, will she assure me that she will abrogate those treaties and we will become an independent nation again?

The Prime Minister: The premise of my hon. Friend’s question is that we would be in the backstop by 1 January 2022. I repeat to my hon. Friend and to others, first, that it is our intention and the intention of the European Union to work to ensure that the backstop need never be brought into place. There are many references throughout the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration that make clear the temporary nature of the backstop, should it be exercised. But of course, as I said earlier, even if an interim arrangement were necessary, it would be the case that alternative arrangements—the extension of the IP—could be in place instead of the backstop.

My hon. Friend asked me about the due date for the end of this Parliament—the general election in 2022. What I am very clear about is that it is my firm intention that we will be firmly in our future relationship with the European Union by the time of the next general election, such that we are able to look the British people in the eye and say, “You gave us an instruction to leave the European Union, and we have delivered.”

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The outline declaration last week referred to Europol and Eurojust, but they are not mentioned in this declaration. All we have is the Prime Minister saying:

“There would be a surrender agreement”.

Frankly, given the loss of British influence that there will be—even though we continue to participate in security arrangements of different kinds, we are not actually making any decisions—this is an apt description, is it not, of the whole document: a surrender of influence agreement for our country?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not. The hon. Gentleman specifically mentioned two agencies in relation to security matters. We have been discussing and negotiating, and he will see in the results of those negotiations on the political declaration a growing recognition on the part of the European Union. At the beginning of this process
the EU felt that it could not give the United Kingdom access to certain security arrangements or arrangements that deal with criminal justice, because we would be a third country. However, we made the case—which the EU accepted—that it is in its interests as well as ours to ensure that we have access to those arrangements, to keep people safe across the EU.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Earlier this morning I visited year 5 in Danemill Primary School in Enderby, before rushing back to London. The year 5 children asked me questions about Brexit. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to tell them that the deal she is proposing is in their best interests to ensure a brighter future for them and the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: First, I commend the pupils of Danemill School whom my hon. Friend visited this morning on the fact that they asked him questions about Brexit, and I reassure them, and him, that this deal sets us on a course for a brighter future. For those pupils, this is about their future; it is about jobs and opportunities for them, and that is what the deal delivers.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This deal keeps the common fisheries policy after Brexit. We will still have the rules, but no way to influence them. No freedom of movement means that our fish processing industry will lose half its workforce. Trading access to our waters for trade access is exactly what the Prime Minister’s Secretary of State for Scotland said would make him resign. Has he gone yet? Will the Prime Minister admit that this deal is a disaster for Scotland and for our fishing industry, which has been sold out by the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: First, I commend the pupils of Danemill School whom my hon. Friend visited this morning. However, we made the case—which the EU accepted—that it is in its interests as well as ours to ensure that we have access to those arrangements, to keep people safe across the EU.

Mr Speaker: Let me call the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), whom I hope the whole House will unite in congratulating her election as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Thank you for those kind words, Mr Speaker, and let me therefore ask an appropriate question of the Prime Minister. In the section on foreign policy, defence and security, paragraph 107 talks about considering appropriate arrangements for co-operation in space. Many space assets are vital for the defence and security of the country. How will all parties to this agreement ensure that whatever arrangements are made do not weaken the NATO alliance, and that they ensure that any capability is available for the future security and defence of the whole alliance membership?

The Prime Minister: First, let me add my congratulations to the hon. Lady on her election as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. She refers to what will be possible within NATO and the capabilities available to NATO. We remain committed to NATO, and we always have been, as the secure element of our defence. We have had to take some decisions including, as she will be aware, a key decision about some future capabilities in relation to Galileo, because what was being offered by the European Union would not have given us sufficient ability to be part of and participate in that system. That is why we decided to take our own decision and go it alone in that area.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But it is a wish list, isn’t it?

The Prime Minister: No, this is a commitment on both sides to the future relationship that we will now be negotiating into legal text. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, a key decision about some future capabilities in relation to Galileo makes clear the importance of both sides putting their best endeavours into ensuring that this future relationship is negotiated in legal text and available by the end of December 2020.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The political declaration contains some interesting additions from last week’s draft, including paragraph 54, which states:

“The Parties also agree to consider addressing social security coordination in the light of future movement of persons.”

That sounds as though EU nationals working in the UK under the terms of the agreement could continue claiming benefits from our benefits system. Can the Prime Minister clarify?

The Prime Minister: This is in relation to some very specific issues, which I am happy to write to the hon. Lady about.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As I serve on a Select Committee with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), may I join the whole House in congratulating President Moon on her appointment?

Unlike the Leader of the Opposition, I have read both documents. I was the Conservative party spokesman on the Lisbon treaty in 2008, a bagatelle of a mere 300 pages, so I believe that perhaps I have understood...
the withdrawal agreement. The political declaration—I would like the Prime Minister to confirm this—is not in any way legally binding. The withdrawal agreement is. It is a draft treaty, which as the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee knows, would bind us under international law. The problem I have is that the Prime Minister has, at the Dispatch Box, repeatedly made commitments that we would leave the customs union. That is in our election manifesto, yet in this draft treaty we would remain in the backstop and we could only leave if the EU let us—the so-called “Hotel California” dilemma. Moreover, she has said that she would never contemplate a border down the Irish sea, yet the withdrawal agreement contemplates exactly that. Prime Minister, why have you repeatedly made commitments at the Dispatch Box and then done the opposite? And when will the meaningful vote—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the right hon. Gentleman is concluding his question.

Mr Francois: I just asked the Prime Minister when the meaningful vote will be. Will it be before or after Christmas?

The Prime Minister: On my right hon. Friend’s last point, discussions are taking place in the normal manner on these matters. There is a balance we need to address between ensuring there are sufficient days of debate for this House coming up to the meaningful vote, and recognising the timetable we need to be aware of in relation to getting the withdrawal agreement Bill through on the basis of a positive vote.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend will not be surprised that I do not accept some of the points he made in his interpretation of the nature of the document we have before us. We will be leaving the customs union. He is absolutely right that I have said that at the Dispatch Box. I have said it elsewhere and I am happy to repeat it now at the Dispatch Box. That is the point of the future framework we are setting up. We have to link the clause in article 184 of the withdrawal agreement between the two documents, although we have the linkage clause in article 184 of the withdrawal agreement in relation to the best endeavours to put this in place. I responded earlier in relation to the backstop. But it is the future framework—and the future relationship—we want to see in place on 1 January 2021 that will ensure that we do not remain in the customs union and we do not remain in the single market, and that we are able to do the things and take the judgments and have control in the areas that people voted for when they voted in the referendum.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the Prime Minister’s last answer on the meaningful vote, will she make it clear that she and her new Brexit Secretary accept the recommendations of the Procedure Committee to have the votes and debates on amendments before the debate and vote on the main motion?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will recognise that there are certain matters that are for the House, but I repeat the point I have made in this Chamber before on a number of occasions. If you asked members of the public, “If Parliament is asked to vote on the deal that the Government have brought back from Europe, what do you expect Parliament to vote on?”, I think they would expect Parliament to be able to have a vote on the deal. We have been clear that a motion may be amendable, but people will want to know the view of Parliament on the deal as it is brought back from Europe.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome this declaration and, in particular, the strong and explicit commitments to ensure that free movement will end, that the country will have the freedom to strike trade deals around the world, and yet that we will forge a strong and close economic partnership with the European Union. Is that not exactly what business wants? Is not the withdrawal agreement’s provision for a transition period what business wants, and should not those of us who wish to implement and honour the referendum decision recognise that this sets the path towards a pragmatic and orderly Brexit and that we should think very carefully before rejecting it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The withdrawal agreement allows for that implementation period. That is exactly what business had requested and what will give business the certainty that it wants. I think that is exactly one of the aspects that every Member of this House will wish to consider when they come to the meaningful vote.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): My constituents who voted to leave the European Union want me to oppose this deal because for them it does not reflect the aspirations of sovereignty and control that were promised during the referendum. My constituents who voted remain want me to vote against this deal because it does not deliver the economic security that led them to vote remain, and I think all of them are horrified by the notion that this country would be locked into protracted negotiations for years, if not decades. When the Prime Minister goes to the European Council this weekend, will she be honest with the other countries that this deal does not have the support of the House of Commons? And when will she wake up to the reality, which is that if she wants to see this deal in practice, it is right, for both principled and pragmatic reasons, to ask the people, “Do you want to proceed with Brexit as it is being delivered, or would you rather remain in the European Union?”? What is she afraid of?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): The reason why the 2016 referendum was the largest democratic exercise that this country has ever seen was that that campaign engaged people who were marginalised and disillusioned and who did not participate in our democratic process. Many of those people in the months and years since that vote have written to me, and I imagine to many other colleagues, expressing their concern that somehow what they voted for would not be delivered. I have written back to them, based on the excellent speeches that the Prime Minister has made and on the promises that both Front-Bench teams made in their manifestos last year, promising that it would, but it strikes me that where we are today is maybe not where the Prime Minister hoped we would be when we started off. Would it not be
more candid to say to the British public that this deal is not where the Prime Minister hoped we would be when she assumed office after the referendum?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, when we go through negotiations, compromises are made on both sides—that is the nature of a negotiation—but I have kept my focus on delivering what I believe were the key issues that, as my hon. Friend said, many people who had never entered the democratic process before voted for when they voted to leave the European Union.

I think that key for many people was bringing an end to free movement, and this brings an end to free movement. I think that the end of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice and the end of sending those vast amounts of money to the European Union every year were two other key factors that people voted for. That is what this deal delivers, but it does so in a way that does protect their jobs. I think that the people whom my hon. Friend talks about—those who, up and down the country, felt marginalised all too often in the past—want to see a Government who are protecting their jobs and livelihoods, but are also setting a course that will give a brighter future to them and their children.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Last night the Chancellor of the Exchequer conceded on national television that the Government’s “worst of all worlds” Brexit will make the country much poorer than the future to them and their children. Is what this deal delivers, but it does so in a way that does protect their jobs. I think that the people whom my hon. Friend talks about—those who, up and down the country, felt marginalised all too often in the past—want to see a Government who are protecting their jobs and livelihoods, but are also setting a course that will give a brighter future to them and their children.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Without informed consent, there is no valid consent. Following the publication of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, we now have a much clearer idea of what Brexit looks like, which allows people to weigh up the risks and the benefits. That is what informed consent is all about. Does the Prime Minister accept that we have reached an impasse in the House, and that now that we are in a position to ask people for their informed consent, it really is time for a people’s vote on this final deal?

The Prime Minister: As I have indicated to a number of Members—obviously I have answered the question about a people’s vote before—I strongly believe that having asked people in this country to determine whether or not this country should remain in the European Union, as they have done, it is appropriate that we allow people to determine whether or not the European Union should remain in the European Union.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The problem is that there are no guarantees that things will be as good as they are now. NHS patients get new drugs six months earlier because we are a member of the European Medicines Agency, but the declaration just says that we will “explore the possibility” of future co-operation with the EMA. Would not patients be better off joining my kids writing their wish lists to Santa tonight than reely on this wish list from the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: There is an assumption in relation to some of these issues, such as our recognition of the role of the European Medicines Agency in the political declaration, that somehow this is only about the UK asking the European Union. Actually, what we are looking at in relation to these matters—the EMA and the European Chemicals Agency, and, indeed, the European Aviation Safety Agency—is, in a number of areas, what is in the mutual interests of both sides, the UK and the European Union. An awful lot of work is done here, in the UK, by our pharmaceutical companies in terms of placing drugs on the European market. There are benefits to both sides of our being able to keep that co-operation in the European Medicines Agency.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister had already told the House that we would be giving away a minimum of £39 billion to the EU. We have learnt today that the implementation period might be extended, which would mean billions of pounds more of taxpayers’ money being given away to the EU in return for a wish list. How does the Prime Minister square that with her red line that we are not giving billions of pounds to the European Union?

The Prime Minister: First, I did not say that it would be a minimum of £39 billion. The financial settlement that has been achieved in the withdrawal agreement is for £39 billion. That £39 billion is less than half what a number of commentators and others were suggesting—including from the European Union—at the beginning of that negotiation.

It is right that there is a difference between the backstop and the extension of the implementation period, but in that period of implementation, I think there would be an expectation of payments, and in the backstop there is no financial obligation. That is one of the reasons why it is not attractive to the European Union for us to be in the backstop. But the decision in relation to those, or, indeed, the alternative arrangements that are developed, would be a decision for the United Kingdom. It would be for the United Kingdom to determine which of those we wished to be in, were it necessary—as my hon. Friend knows, I want it not to be necessary—to cover an interim period before we were in the future relationship.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Prime Minister says that she has changed the minds of EU countries on data sharing to enable continued security co-operation, but rather than any mention of the second generation Schengen information system, the strongest language in the declaration, in paragraph 87, is that: “The Parties should consider further arrangements appropriate to the United Kingdom’s future status... such as exchange of information on wanted or missing persons... with the view to delivering capabilities that, in so far as is technically and legally possible, and considered necessary and in both Parties’ interests, approximate those enabled by relevant Union mechanisms.”

I put it to the Prime Minister that that tortuous, weak language suggests that we are not going to remain part of that incredibly important system to which we gained full access when she was Home Secretary.
The Prime Minister: We have indeed moved the European Union on. As I said earlier, it started from the position that we could not share security capabilities because we were a non-member and that position has changed. The hon. Gentleman referenced SIS II. A number of hon. Members have raised concerns about SIS II and the European criminal records information system. They provide for the exchange of information on wanted or missing persons and objects and of criminal records, which is exactly what is referenced in the text in paragraph 87. It does not name SIS II and ECRIS, but it does refer to the information that is exchanged within those two bodies. It might help the hon. Gentleman if I point out that SIS II was technically a Schengen-based system, and as a member of the EU outside Schengen it took a lot of negotiation for us to get into SIS II even within the EU. What we have here is a recognition that we can put arrangements in place to ensure we are still able to exchange the very data that are exchanged in SIS II.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the substantial progress she has made since last week, not least the inclusion in paragraph 23 of the statement that economic partnership should ensure no tariffs across all sectors, which will be vital to my midlands constituency with its manufacturing industry. A critical issue to my constituents, 60% of whom voted "out", is whether we will truly regain national self-determination by 1 January 2021. Can she reassure me on that point, please?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: I am sure that is what many people voted for, and that is what this future relationship will deliver. As I have indicated, obviously we have to negotiate the legal text of that future relationship, but there is every commitment and determination to ensure that that is in place by 1 January 2021. This deal will deliver that sovereignty that my hon. Friend looks for.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the political declaration is not legally binding and is merely the basis of at least one more year of protracted negotiations with our European partners?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained, we still have the legal text to negotiate in relation to this document. [Interruption.] We still have the legal text to negotiate in relation to this document! What we have is a linkage between the withdrawal agreement in article 184 and the work that will go forward in relation to this. But, yes, there is further negotiation on the legal text of this document. I have been very clear about that in answer to a number of questions.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for her steadfast focus on jobs throughout these negotiations. Paragraph 32 talks about “the temporary entry and stay of natural persons for business purposes”.

Businesses and people in my constituency have said that this is incredibly important in relation to both manufacturing and services. Can we ensure this paragraph is as strong as possible in the agreement, because it underpins hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of the temporary arrangements for businesses around the country. We will have that in mind when we continue the negotiation of the legal text, but I recognise that that temporary stay is important for many businesses, including those in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hallmark of this process has been slogans and empty platitudes, and I am afraid that this document just continues that run of poor form. May I draw the Prime Minister’s attention specifically to paragraph 24, which says:

“The Parties will also explore the possibility of cooperation of United Kingdom authorities with Union agencies such as the European Medicines Agency”.

May I remind the Prime Minister that in July this House voted to remain part of the European Medicines Agency? She will remember it because the amendment was proposed by her neighbour, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee). Why is she ignoring the will of the House?

The Prime Minister: We are not ignoring the will of the House. We recognise what was expressed by this House back in the summer. We will be negotiating on the legal text in relation to our future co-operation with the European Medicines Agency, the European Chemicals Agency and the European Aviation Safety Agency.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for siding with my constituents, who trusted this Government’s and the Opposition’s manifesto commitments to leave the European Union, as they voted to do? It is obvious that there are concerns about the backstop in this House and across the country. She has done brilliantly well to negotiate more stuff in. May I ask her to press a little a bit harder on Saturday?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for reminding the House that something like 80% of Members of this House stood on a manifesto to leave the European Union, to deliver on the vote of the referendum, and I hope all Members will recall that when they come to the meaningful vote. He is right about the concerns expressed in relation to the backstop, and I recognise those concerns. That is why we have been looking at alternative arrangements that could be put in place, and we will continue to work on those.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I think we should celebrate the largest democratic vote in our history and be determined to implement leaving the European Union, but I have to say that after two and a half years, I am disappointed that the Prime Minister has come back not with a deal but with the preconditions for a negotiation, and expects the House to vote on it. The fact is that the European Commission, the European Parliament and the other 27 countries are more satisfied than this House is with what the Prime Minister has proposed to them. I do not believe from what the Prime Minister has said so far that she is guaranteeing the future sovereignty of this country. To take just one example, she talks about regulatory alignment. That means we will not be able to adjust our regulations and laws to enable our industries—biological and agricultural industries—to benefit from our independence.
The Prime Minister: Paragraph 138 makes it clear that “it is the clear intent of both Parties to develop in good faith agreements giving effect to this relationship.”

The hon. Gentleman refers to sovereignty. The contents of the political declaration are a recognition that there is a balance between the question of checks at the border and the degree to which rules are accepted and operated on both sides of that border. What we set out in the White Paper we published in July was a recognition of that and a proposal that frictionless trade came with a commitment to a common rulebook, but with a parliamentary lock, so that it would be a decision of the UK—of the UK Parliament—to choose to diverge from those rules.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that divergence from those rules such that products were manufactured not in line with the standards and regulations operating in the European Union would have an impact on access to the market of the European Union, just as it would under any other agreement we made with other parts of the world. We will be sovereign—this deal delivers that sovereignty—but if it is in place, it will be for this House to decide where it wishes to go in relationship to the rulebook that enables access to a market versus divergence and a sovereign decision.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): As the Prime Minister has said, beyond this place people are just desperate that we get Brexit over and done with. I have met many people in my constituency who greatly admire the resolve that we get Brexit over and done with. I have met many constituents who want us to get on with this and build that brighter future.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is for us in this House to look pragmatically at what will deliver for the British people. That is what I have done in this deal, and it is what I believe the deal delivers for the British people. He is right that we should remember the many people up and down the country who want us to get on with this and build that brighter future.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Prime Minister has spent much of the past two years wrangling with her own MPs and allowing the hard Brexiteer tail to wag the Tory dog. The result we now see is a blind Brexit in which 44% of UK trade will be dependent on the fulfilment of a wish list. Will she now concede that this level of fundamental risk to every nation and region of the UK and every sector of the UK economy is not what anyone voted for in June 2016?

The Prime Minister: What people voted for is for us to leave the European Union and to bring control of money, borders and laws back to this country, and we are doing so in a way that protects jobs and livelihoods up and down the country.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): There is much here that is reassuring to my constituents working in the health, aerospace, automobile and nuclear energy sectors. They are people who see, above all, the need for sensible compromise to achieve continuity, rather than disruption, when we leave the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the big divide now is between them and those who would risk anything for no deal or no Brexit, putting at risk every chance of achieving a deal that few may love but most could live with?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Most of our constituents up and down the country will want Members of Parliament to deliver on the vote to leave the European Union by ensuring that we leave the European Union, while also looking at considerations around their jobs, their livelihoods and their futures. It is this deal that does both, protecting jobs while also delivering on the vote.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The police have agreed that the most important instruments for our security are the second-generation Schengen information system, the European arrest warrant, ECRIS, Europol, Eurojust and European investigation orders. Is it not the case that, without full membership of those organisations or access to those databases, we are blinding law enforcement in its fight against organised crime and terrorism?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady gives a list of what she thinks are important security arrangements. She left out Prüm and the passenger name records, which are incredibly important in dealing with organised criminals, solving crimes and dealing with terrorists. We are clear that we are working on the arrangements that will enable us to exchange the very type of information that is exchanged in SIS II and ECRIS.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I put aside my fear of the backstop agreement and come straight to the point. My right hon. Friend is right that we do not want another referendum; we want to see the benefits of the one we had. To that end, I thoroughly welcome what she said about negotiating deals during the implementation period. Can she assure us all that those deals will come to fruition, even if the implementation period is extended?

The Prime Minister: Those deals would come to fruition. I think the point is that, in an extended implementation period, there would continue to be an issue about the ability to put those deals into practice, which may be the issue my hon. Friend is raising. That is one of the factors about an extension of the implementation period. Whether we should be balancing the backstop versus that or alternative arrangements, would have to be taken into account.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister will be aware that my party colleagues and I profoundly disagree with her on the Ulster protocol, or the backstop agreement, but we recognise that she is working very hard to square an elusive circle, and we pay tribute to her for seeking to overcome that great difficulty. If paragraphs 26 and 27 of the declaration mean anything of substance, does she accept that there would therefore be no need for the Ulster protocol or backstop? Can she confirm what she meant in page 5 of her statement today, that the backstop will be “quickly superseded”? Can she quantify what “quickly” means?
The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right in this sense: the alternative arrangements or indeed the extension of the implementation period could be chosen as a means of ensuring that the backstop was not put into place. I talked about the period of time for which the backstop would be in place, were it ever used, and it is absolutely clear in a number of ways throughout this document that it is only intended to be temporary, because it is intended to cover an interim period before the future relationship comes into place. The best way for us to be able to guarantee our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland on having no hard border is through our future relationship, which will be the permanent relationship and which will ensure that we deliver on that commitment.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The majority of my constituents voted to leave the EU. Many of those people are among the thousands of workers in my constituency who work in manufacturing or in the logistics industry, which completely depend on being able to move goods across borders. My constituents voted to get control of our money, laws and borders, but I am sure that in doing that they were also expecting that manufacturing industry and logistics would be able to continue to operate properly, so that we maintain their jobs and can create more jobs in the future to go with them. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that is exactly what she is trying to achieve in the work she is doing on behalf of the British people?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many people, his constituents and others, voted leave in order to bring back control of our money, laws and borders, but of course they also have wanted to ensure that those jobs were there for them and their children in the future. Our support for manufacturing industry is an important part of that and that is exactly what this deal delivers.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has talked again about there being a spectrum of future relationships with our closest and largest trading partners, but is it not the truth that, stripped back to essentials, and despite the incredible vagueness of this document, this is firmly leading us towards a Canada-style free trade arrangement, rather than any alternative model; that that is widely understood to be an act of economic self-harm; that it will leave this country poorer; and that absolutely nobody voted in the 2016 referendum to be poorer?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend; he is right. He said that many people in his constituency voted against politics as usual. They will be surprised to see politicians playing politics with this issue in this Chamber. Every Member of this House must consider the interests of constituents, the need to deliver on the vote of the people to leave the European Union and to do so in a way that is in the best interests of our constituents.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), the west midlands economy is largely about manufacturing and it relies very much on the free movement of labour, particularly for research and development in the universities, such as the one in Coventry. I have received a lot of letters from constituents who work at those universities or in the national health service, and they are concerned about the free movement of labour and that they might not be able to move as freely as they want backwards and forwards. Can the Prime Minister give some reassurances about those jobs and about the situation regarding those people?

The Prime Minister: Free movement will come to an end, but what we will ensure is that we have an immigration system that is skills-based. I think that would reflect the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has expressed in his question. So it will be about the contribution that people can make here to the United Kingdom, and the Home Office will look, within that, at ensuring that the system in place is as easy to use and efficient as possible.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that we should take no lectures from SNP politicians about fishing, because we know all too well that they want to drag our fishermen right back into the common fisheries policy. Can she confirm that the UK will be sitting down unfettered at the negotiating table as an independent coastal state by December 2020 and on an annual basis thereafter?

The Prime Minister: That is certainly our position. That remains our position. Of course a reference within the fisheries section—I think it is in the fisheries section—refers to the desire to have those arrangements in place by July 2020, such that they are in place for the consideration of fixing access and quotas for 2021 and thereafter.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): On financial services, the Prime Minister said that equivalence would not be withdrawn on a whim. Will she tell the House what she meant by that? At the moment, equivalence for a third country can be withdrawn by the European Union at 30 days’ notice, as Switzerland is now experiencing. Will it be different for the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes. If the right hon. Gentleman cares to look at the language in the political declaration, it is clear that what we are negotiating for financial services does in fact go beyond what is available elsewhere.
Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Yesterday in the Treasury Committee, we took evidence from Mr Thompson, the chief executive of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. He said that it would take 24 months from the moment of certainty to put in place a new customs system. He said that that moment of certainty could be next July, in which case we would have six months of transition, or six months of backstop. Can the Prime Minister tell us which would be selected, as well as how and by whom? If there is no moment of certainty, because there is ultimately no agreement despite the best endeavours of both sides, will there be a risk of our ending up in an extended transition period, effectively a form of “Hotel California”? How do we resolve that particular risk?

The Prime Minister: I have not had an opportunity to look at the transcript of the evidence that was given by HMRC yesterday. It was clear when we published our proposals on customs in the summer that the facilitated customs arrangement within that would be capable of mainly being in place by 1 January 2021, albeit that the repayment mechanism in that system would take longer to put into place. What my hon. Friend will see throughout this document is the clear intent and determination of both parties to ensure that we negotiate these arrangements in relation to customs and the free trade area, and indeed the overall future relationship, such that it is in place by 1 January 2021.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): We want a permanent customs union, to support jobs in the UK. Paragraph 23, on tariffs, in today’s document commits to “build and improve on the single customs territory”. How will the Government do that?

The Prime Minister: There are a number of features of that single customs territory that are important in looking at customs arrangements for the future. For example, it has normally been said that it is not possible to have good customs arrangements with the European Union without free movement, but that single customs territory allows us do exactly that—to divide those two freedoms.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am pleased that paragraph 24 recognises the importance of our relationship with a number of EU agencies, especially as some of my local businesses have emphasised the importance of the role of the European Chemicals Agency. Will my right hon. Friend expand on how she sees our relationship with the European Chemicals Agency developing as we leave the EU, in order to reassure my local businesses?

The Prime Minister: This is important, and we recognise the significance of these agencies, each in their own way, to businesses in the United Kingdom. As I indicated in an earlier response, there is currently no model for third country representation or participation in the European Chemicals Agency, and that is precisely why it is necessary for us to carry on working with the European Union to see on what basis and under what conditions that participation can take place.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): We have heard at the all-party parliamentary group on textiles and fashion, which I chair, that the industry has grave concerns about services, intellectual property rights and brand control. Instead of “Choose Life”, there was a newly designed T-shirt about the Prime Minister’s deal bearing the slogan “Fashion hates Brexit”. Can the Prime Minister reassure this massive industry, which contributes £21.9 billion to our economy annually?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the significance of that industry to our economy. Representations from the industry have been made to me, particularly about issues such as the future immigration system that we will put in place and the concern about ensuring that people of high skills will still be able to come to the United Kingdom to participate in and help to develop the industry. Our immigration system will indeed be skills-based.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Does this political declaration negate the legal status of the backstop, which will be enshrined in a legally binding international treaty?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows that the withdrawal agreement is indeed a legal document and that the legal text around the political declaration has still to be negotiated. There is a linkage between the withdrawal agreement and the political agreement, as set out clearly in the withdrawal agreement. With regard to the backstop, it is clear that, were we to be in it, it would be only temporary, but also that that is not the only option if it is necessary to have an interim arrangement to provide for our guarantees for the people of Northern Ireland prior to the future relationship coming into place.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Article 8 of the withdrawal agreement says that the UK will not have access to EU networks after we leave. That clearly contradicts the political declaration and its weak references in paragraph 24 to common regulations. Will the Prime Minister finally come clean with the chemicals, aviation and medical sectors referred to in the political declaration and admit that she has not the first idea how to deliver what they all need?

The Prime Minister: As I have said in response to a number of other Members who have raised this issue, there is currently no model for the participation of a third country in the European Chemicals Agency or the European Medicines Agency, which is why it is necessary for the negotiation to take place to ensure that we can, because it is in the interests of both sides—the United Kingdom and the European Union—that such participation is available in future.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Prime Minister has repeated yet again today that we will leave the European Union on 29 March. She has also frequently repeated that no deal is better than a bad deal. The 70% of my constituents who voted to leave are even more determined that they want that to happen. Will she assure them that in the event that the agreement was rejected by the House, the Government would hold fast and ensure that we did indeed still leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: I give my hon. Friend the assurance that as far as I am concerned we are leaving on 29 March 2019, and that is what this Government are working towards. My hon. Friend will be aware that some voices...
around the Chamber would prefer us not to leave on 29 March 2019—[Interruption.] I hear the odd yes from Labour Members on that—but I am clear that we will be leaving on 29 March 2019.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said in her statement:

“The EU said that the choice was binary—Norway or Canada—but the political declaration recognises that there is a spectrum”. I would like to hear what the Prime Minister’s spectrum is. Bearing in mind the range of views across the House, that spectrum should surely keep all the options open; otherwise, this political declaration is already past its sell-by date.

The Prime Minister: Actually, the document makes clear what that spectrum is. As I have referred to on other occasions in response to questions, there is a balance between checks and controls and the acceptance of rules and regulations.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Hon. and gallant Members on both sides of the Chamber will be familiar with the term mission command. They will also be familiar with the importance of regularly restating the mission. Will my right hon. Friend therefore restate for the House today that any Government led by her will have as its mission that we will take back control of our money, borders, laws and trade policy, that we will be leaving on 29 March 2019 and that nothing in this withdrawal agreement will require our British forces to join a European army?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that absolute commitment. Indeed, it is the United Kingdom within the European Union that has been arguing against the creation of a European army. We are very clear that the bedrock of defence for Europe is NATO. There may be ways in which the European Union can act on the defence field that complements NATO, but there is no question of any British personnel joining the European army.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Earlier this afternoon, the Prime Minister admitted to this House that she had failed to negotiate Britain’s continued involvement in the Galileo satellite project. Will she tell the House how much it will cost this country to develop an alternative because of her failure?

The Prime Minister: In any negotiation, there are two sides. There were reasons why the European Union did not want the United Kingdom to be part of Galileo on the basis on which we felt that it was right for us to participate. At that point, a decision has to be taken. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that the real failure would have been to say that we would remain in Galileo on a basis that did not permit us to have guarantees in relation to our security. It is better for us to say that we would do it ourselves and ensure that security.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Electric pulse phishing by Dutch trawlers off the East Anglian coast is devastating our fisheries and should stop now. Can the Prime Minister confirm that there is nothing in the political declaration that undermines the cornerstone of the Fisheries Bill that, in future, we will control access to our waters and will be able to stop this abhorrent practice?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we will be an independent coastal state. We will be negotiating that access to our waters in our own interests, but, as my hon. Friend will see within the fishing opportunities section of the political declaration, we are very clear that we need to work to ensure that fishing is at sustainable levels. That is in the interests of all fishermen to ensure that the industry can survive and be sustainable into the future.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s deal has succeeded in uniting people who have written to me who voted to leave and who voted to remain, and that position is reflected in this House in opposition to the deal. Given that there is no prospect of this House voting through her deal and no prospect of this House voting for no deal, what is the contingency plan that she is making?

The Prime Minister: I am here recommending this deal. All Members of the House of Commons, when they come to the meaningful vote, will have to consider their duty to deliver on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union and to consider the jobs of their constituents up and down the country. This deal protects those jobs and delivers on that vote.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I have listened intently to what my right hon. Friend has said on fishing. This afternoon, the deputy EU Brexit negotiator, Sabine Weyand, tweeted:

“We need an EU-UK fisheries agreement that covers both access to waters and market access”
as it is in the best interests of both sides. As this document is not binding, will my right hon. Friend provide a cast-iron guarantee today, and in writing to me so that we have it in black and white, that any fisheries agreement will never link access to our waters with single market access and that the UK will determine who fishes in our waters, when they fish in our waters and what they fish in our waters?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has identified that this is an issue on which there are strong feelings in the European Union. We have rigorously resisted attempts to link these two issues. He asked me to write to him, but I am tempted to say that what I said in my statement was that the fisheries agreement is not something that we will be trading off against any other priorities. That is not just in a letter from me to him; it will be in Hansard. I hope that he will take some comfort from that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Two hundred of my constituents—people who are highly skilled and who regulate chemicals for the agricultural sector—will lose their jobs if this deal goes through. Why should they back her?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has made a statement there, and I am not sure about the nature of the jobs that she mentions. We are clear about the importance of our agricultural industry and of our negotiating on the European Chemicals Agency, if that is one of the issues that she was talking about. This is a deal that is good for the UK because it is a deal that protects jobs.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Although I commend my right hon. Friend for her extraordinary energies, given that the whole basis of this declaration is trust, does she trust the European Union and how, ultimately, will it be held to its side of the bargain?

The Prime Minister: We have negotiated in good faith. As for holding people to their side of the bargain, my hon. Friend will see that action can be taken through legal measures if we were to believe that the European Union was no longer acting in good faith.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am looking at a statement from @ScotTories that said: “Let me be absolutely clear: As we leave the EU, we need complete control over UK fishing. #NonNegotiatable”.

In a reply to the BBC, one hon. Member was asked whether the final deal would affect how they might vote in the meaningful vote, and they said that it would and that it would be very important. How will the Prime Minister explain the whole Scottish backstab to @ScotTories, because the deal is not about complete control, is it?

The Prime Minister: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman read Hansard to see the references I made to fishing and the commitments that this Government made to the fishing industry.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) rose—

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.
The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with what my hon. Friend has just said. If this House were to stop Brexit, the British people would feel that it was a gross betrayal of the trust that we had shown in them and they had shown in us. I believe that it is a matter of our integrity as politicians that we deliver on the vote that we gave to the British people, when they told us, in no uncertain terms, to leave the European Union.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): The withdrawal agreement worsens the situation for the UK in terms of EU state aid, leaving the UK legally bound by European Commission decisions. Currently, the European Commission waves through state aid cases case by case, but that will not be so for the UK, with our economy and major industries permanently disadvantaged. At the same time, workers’ rights and environmental protections seem not to have any of the same types of protection. Was this negotiated by the Prime Minister, or was it at the behest of the EU?

The Prime Minister: We have made this clear on a number of occasions, and the proposals that we have put forward are very clear about non-regression in relation to workers’ rights. We already, in some areas, have higher standards on workers’ rights than other countries in the European Union, and we have, as a Government, been working to enhance workers’ rights in a number of ways, not least in our response to the Matthew Taylor report. It was this Government who banned exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts—a matter that the Labour party spoke about for many years but failed to do anything about.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): EU citizens currently make up 17% of UK academic staff, and many universities are concerned by the Government’s plans to roll out tier 2 visas to EU citizens after Brexit. This means an average three-month delay between job offer and job take-up. Universities tell me that this will have a detrimental impact on their ability to continue to compete on the world stage. So what does the Prime Minister say to our universities, such as Goldsmith’s in my constituency, about their plans to maintain their global competitiveness?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham).

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): With regard to transport, the previous Brexit Secretary admitted that he did not understand the criticality of Dover. Shamefully, it took from June 2016 until just last month before the Transport Secretary bothered to go and visit the port of Dover. After two years of the Transport Secretary promoting an aviation agreement, he now admits that talks have not even begun. Does this not prove, first, that there are no plans in place for no deal; and secondly, that this absolute ineptitude means that there is no way that this Prime Minister would be able to negotiate proper agreements in an implementation period?

The Prime Minister: There are plans in place for no deal, and the Government are continuing to work on those.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): There is something in this document that gives me hope. In paragraph 125, the British Government have committed, in deciding the strategic direction for the future relationship, to encouraging civil society dialogue. According to the European definition, that means speaking to the public. If the Prime Minister will not commit to a general election or a people’s vote, how will she seek to take the views of the British people on this proposal? If she does not, does that not show that the words in the paper are worthless?

The Prime Minister: The British people gave us their view on our membership of the EU in June 2016, and we are delivering on it.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): For all the Prime Minister’s bluster, this political declaration underlines that 18 months of shambolic negotiations have produced embarrassingly little. Parliament looks set to be asked to vote and agree to a blind Brexit and to a deal that, despite what she claims, does not protect jobs, rights or the economy. When will she wake up to the reality that any deal she brings to the House cannot command the support of the House and will leave the country poorer?

The Prime Minister: This is the right deal for the UK. It delivers on the vote while protecting jobs, livelihoods, security and our Union.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Prime Minister has recently said two things. On the one hand, she has said that the UK will definitely be leaving the EU on 29 March next year—in fact, she repeated that today. On the other hand, she has said there is a risk—or, as many of my constituents would call it, a chance—of no Brexit. How can those two statements coexist as opinions in her mind without causing a major malfunction?

The Prime Minister: Very simply: I am clear that we will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019, but there are some voices across the House that want to frustrate that. That would betray the vote of the British people.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I genuinely believe that this is a bad deal for the north of England. Manchester airport in my constituency caters for 30 million passengers, but the Prime Minister’s favourite rhetoric is about ending free movement. Does she not acknowledge that that works both ways? Why on earth should I vote for a deal that restricts the right of workers to travel and work abroad?

The Prime Minister: The UK will end free movement and put in place its own immigration system for people from across the world, including from EU member states. Of course, the arrangements that other member states put in place will be a matter for them. We have clear arrangements for the sort of short-term visits—tourist and business visits—that are an important part of the movement the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Speaking as the newest Member, I can say that from day one I have been bombarded with correspondence from constituents requesting a people’s vote. The Prime Minister continually states that this is a good deal for the UK—not
the best deal or a brilliant deal but a good deal. If she is so confident, there is no reason not to go for a people’s vote.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), in relation to Schengen, the Prime Minister admitted that it was incredibly difficult and took a long time to negotiate an agreement with the EU when already in the EU. If that is so, how on earth does she think it will be easy, straightforward or quick to negotiate all the hundreds, if not thousands, of agreements implied in this document?

The Prime Minister: First, it is in the interests of both sides to have that access. Secondly, the fact that we did negotiate membership of SIS II, despite our not being a member of Schengen, shows it is possible to negotiate such a thing when both sides see that it is in their interests.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If the Prime Minister is so proud of this document and the withdrawal agreement and believes that it is what people voted for, why does she not seek to strengthen her really terribly weak negotiating hand by putting it to a people’s vote, along with the alternative of staying in the EU? And before she gives another glib answer about the life sciences sector, I should say that almost 3,000 of my constituents have written to me with their concerns about Brexit. They deserve the courtesy of a proper answer.

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question about a people’s vote on a number of occasions, and the hon. Gentleman will be able to see that answer in Hansard.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I have listened closely to the answers that the Prime Minister has given to questions about relationships with agencies such as the European Medicines Agency. People think that this is a deal, but it is not; it is the start of a long and complex negotiation. She will know that representatives of the life sciences sector have said that it is essential for our future that we have full membership of these agencies. Are they wrong?

The Prime Minister: As I said in an earlier answer, the declaration states that “it is the clear intent of both Parties to develop in good faith agreements giving effect to this relationship”.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the life sciences sector. This Government have been putting together a life sciences sector deal. We recognise the importance of the life sciences sector, and it is our modern industrial strategy that is delivering for the life sciences sector.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If we are being honest, the majority of Members are at an age where they have more yesterdays than tomorrows, but there are millions of young people out there whose opportunities will be curtailed as a result of Brexit. I want to ask the Prime Minister a question that I have been asking since I entered the House. Will a first-year student at Lochend High School in Easterhouse still be able to enjoy Erasmus by the time they leave high school?

The Prime Minister: We have referred to the continuing ability for us to participate in programmes, and Erasmus is one of those that we had in mind, but of course, we have to look at the conditions that would be required for our continuing membership of Erasmus. I challenge the hon. Gentleman, because I do not believe that the futures of young people are in any way restricted as a result of our decision to leave the European Union. Indeed, the way in which we will build new relationships around the rest of the world could enhance the futures of young people and the opportunities open to them.
Cancer Treatment: Psychological Support

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I am grateful to be granted this debate on psychological support after cancer treatment. I recognise that there will probably be fewer Members here than there have been in the last few hours, but I thank anyone who stays to hear what I have to say.

When we talk about cancer, the conversation often starts with survival. Overall, survival has doubled in the last 40 years in the UK, but we lag behind the best in Europe, and survival rates for certain cancers—such as lung, brain and pancreatic cancer—continue to be extremely low. That means there is, rightly, a drive towards earlier diagnosis and access to new and innovative treatments. However, for most patients, just living is not enough. They want to live well, and that is why we must do more to ensure that patients receive the best possible psychological support after cancer treatment.

It goes without saying that cancer can take a huge emotional toll on patients and those close to them, right from the moment of diagnosis. Less well understood are the consequences of cancer treatment, which can affect patients’ lives on a daily basis and leave them needing support for many years afterwards. No group illustrates that better than stem cell transplant patients.

Every year in the UK, around 2,000 blood cancer patients need a stem cell transplant from a donor to save their life. It is usually their last hope. One third of patients will be lucky to find a matching donor in their families, but the remaining two thirds of patients will require an unrelated donor. The search for a donor can be extremely stressful. Despite the fact that there are more than 1.4 million incredible individuals on the UK stem cell donor register, there are still patients who miss out on the life-saving transplant they need because either no donor is available or a donor cannot be found early enough.

My experience with my son was that we were very fortunate to find a donor. That donor then failed his medical, which was a traumatic experience for the family. Not only were we concerned about what the problem was for the donor, but we did not know whether the donor would return to fulfil that pledge. We will be eternally grateful that he did.

Even when a patient does find a match, this is not the end of their journey. Tellingly, the day of the stem cell transplant is commonly referred to as day zero. First, the patient must spend a number of weeks in hospital isolation to protect them from infection. This alone can be a very difficult experience, with patients often feeling very cut off from the outside world. Things such as patchy wi-fi, poor facilities and rooms without windows do not exactly help with this experience. Hopefully, the patient then begins their recovery, which brings with it entirely new physical, emotional and practical challenges. In fact, of all cancer treatments, stem cell transplant patients experience some of the most severe long-term effects, and it is for that reason that they are often described as patients for life.

To give hon. Members some idea of what it can be like for those living with the long-term effects, approximately half will suffer from graft versus host disease, which is when their new immune system attacks their own body. I can certainly say that this is not a particularly pleasant experience, and in the worst cases it can actually kill the patient as well. Patients can also experience infertility, premature menopause, sexual dysfunction, fatigue and problems with their eyes, bones, teeth, joints and muscles, and they are at higher risk of infections and secondary cancers. In addition, it is not unusual for patients to be left with a range of psychological effects, including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. All of this can have an impact on patients’ ability to study and work, and with that can come financial issues and even a loss of their identity. It can be completely and utterly overwhelming.

With all this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that in response to a survey of more than 300 stem cell transplant patients conducted by Anthony Nolan, the UK’s stem cell transplant charity, nearly half—47%—said that they needed emotional and psychological support, such as counselling or group therapy. It is surprising and even shocking that only half—54%—actually received it.

Let us take some individual cases. Joanna received a stem cell transplant in 2016 to treat acute myeloid leukaemia. It saved her life, but when she got home to her family, she could not get off the sofa or out of bed. It was the worst she had felt since the actual diagnosis. Her daughter was only a teenager at the time, and the curing role of mother to child had to be reversed. In Joanna’s own words:

“I think my lowest emotional time was after transplant. I questioned why I’d gone through this experience and just couldn’t see an end in those first three to four months... I wish there had been more psychological support for me and my family—even though staff tried their best, when I really needed help, it just wasn’t there.”

Joanna’s story is not unique.

Ruth, a teacher from Yorkshire, also received a stem cell transplant in 2016. In the two years since, she has experienced many ups and downs, and she is still dealing with chronic graft versus host disease. For her, this means her eyes are constantly dry, she cannot perform fine motor skills too well and her feet are in constant pain because of nerve damage. Ruth says:

“The biggest downside of my whole transplant experience has been the complete lack of support since leaving hospital. It felt like I was on my own—my GP has offered me nothing. I’m on the waiting list for a counsellor, but it’s very long... I’m surprised you’re not referred to a counsellor as soon as you’re diagnosed.”

As well as those patients who have received transplant, the charity Macmillan has provided me with some other brief personal stories. Let us take Frances, who finished treatment for Hodgkin’s lymphoma five years ago. She says:

“Emotionally, in the first year after treatment I think I was shell-shocked because you’re trying to catch up with everything that has happened to your body. You feel like you’re a failure and you’ve failed to bounce back in the way you think you should have done.”

Ciara, who finished treatment in 2016, says:

“The fear of cancer never leaves you but I’m trying now to think, if it comes back, it comes back. I can’t live under that shadow. But it is so difficult to mentally recover.”

However, for most patients, just living is not enough.
Finally, Chris, who finished his treatment for head and neck cancer in 2016 stated:

“People say to me, ‘I bet you wake up every morning feeling glad to be alive.’ You know, it can’t be further from the truth.”

The stories from Joanna, Ruth, Frances, Ciara and Chris affect all cancer patients—they cover everybody.

So what do we need to do? First, psychological support is for everyone, not just those with diagnosed mental health conditions. Secondly, the families of patients should also be offered psychological support, and thirdly, it seems that patients and their families are not getting the psychological support they need. Let me address those points in turn.

First, psychological support is for everyone, not just those with diagnosed mental health conditions such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. That includes patients who are feeling anxious, worried or frightened, and those who are having trouble adjusting to their “new normal”. The fear of cancer returning can be particularly difficult to manage. For example, some blood cancers relapse, which can be a common occurrence. Even if someone is doing physically well, that sense of dread never goes away for them or their family members.

Because of patients’ varied needs, psychological support can take many forms. Clinical psychologists and others working in improving access to psychological therapies services are able to help those with the most complex needs. Clinical nurse specialists, who we know are hugely valued by patients, can enhance overall wellbeing by providing general emotional support based on skilled communication and effective provision of information. The third sector, meanwhile, provides a wide range of services, including helplines, online forums and peer support. There is no silver bullet, however, and many different actors have a role to play.

Secondly, patients’ families should be offered psychological support because they too feel the consequences of cancer treatment. If someone is acting as their loved one’s carer, that can affect their relationship and ability to go about their daily life. They might have suddenly become the family’s main breadwinner, which could be a source of enormous stress. Family members will often feel as if they have to put a brave face on things and somehow do not deserve help because they are not the ones who are ill. In reality, however, patients regularly say that they worry more about their family than themselves and that in turn can affect their recovery. I know from personal experience that the CLIC Sargent nurse who came to us on a weekly basis to give my son chemotherapy was somebody to talk to who understood, and that side of the process was just as important to us as the medicine being given.

Thirdly, patients and those close to them are not getting the psychological support they need. According to the most recent results from the national cancer patient experience survey, only two thirds of patients felt that they were able to discuss their fears or worries, and I hope the Minister will respond to that.

In many cases, this comes down to workforce—either not enough specialists are available who properly understand the consequences of cancer treatment, or the demands on staff time are so great that it is impossible to provide patients with adequate psychological support.

In response to a 2017 survey of GPs and nurses, 31% of respondents said that workforce pressures mean patients are not being supported to regain a good quality of life after treatment. In other cases, the right support existed but patients are not being appropriately signposted. I have heard of many patients having to be proactive and find help for themselves. Patients should certainly be empowered to take control of their own care, but I think we all agree that this should be a choice and not a necessity. They should not be let down by poor communication and co-ordination, but in many cases they are.

The Minister may refer to the recovery package in her response. It consists of four main interventions: a holistic needs assessment and care plan; a treatment summary; a cancer care review; and access to a health and wellbeing event. This can certainly help to identify patients’ psychological needs and I welcome the fact that NHS England has committed to rolling out the recovery package nationally by 2020. However, does the Minister agree that identifying patients’ needs is only one piece of the puzzle and that more needs to be done to ensure they actually receive the psychological support?

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extremely moving speech. Does he agree that getting the right psychological support from the start also helps the medical treatment? For many cancer patients and their families—as he said, it is very painful for them to watch the treatment—getting psychological support helps them to be able to face going through the treatment, which can be so devastating, as I know he knows.

Mark Tami: That is very important. What we tend to do throughout the whole process is address the disease itself and its physical aspects, but we do not address the psychological damage and problems that can occur. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to do that.

Before I close, I would just like to take a moment to talk about the specific needs of children, teenagers and young adults who have had cancer. They experience many of the same physical and psychological problems as adults, but they also face some unique challenges, such as the impact on their growth and development, education and future prospects. Earlier this year I was very pleased to be part of the inquiry into patient experience by the all-party parliamentary group on children, teenagers and young adults with cancer. I would like to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who set up the group and chairs it. She is doing sterling work and I thank her for that.

When parents and young people were surveyed, 73% felt that not enough was being done to ensure access to post-treatment support. Some 36% of parents and young people identified mental and emotional help as the biggest improvement needed. As Kate Collins, chief executive of Teenage Cancer Trust, summarised:

“Young people have told us that actually the experience of being spat out at the end of treatment can be as traumatic as diagnosis, because all of a sudden you’ve been radically changed, you’ve been through this remarkable transformation experience in lots of ways, you’ve faced problems that lots of adults have not had to face… you may be clear of cancer but often young people are living with long-term effects, be they psychological or physical.”
The all-party group therefore recommended that the Department of Health and Social Care makes mental health support for children, young people and parents a key part of diagnosis, treatment, follow-up and recovery. Furthermore, NHS England should engage with children and young people with cancer to ensure that the recovery package meets that specific need. The all-party group also recommended that the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education should re-examine their proposals in the mental health Green Paper and take account of the impact of a long-term physical condition on young people’s mental health.

When the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) gave evidence to the all-party group, he said:

“For the 80% of children who survive, they’ve got it all ahead of them, so we have to make sure that we tool them up to live their lives.”

Can the Minister tell us what she and the Department are doing to give children, teenagers and young adults the tools they need to deal with the psychological consequences of their treatment?

CLIC Sargent’s 2017 report, “Hidden Costs”, found that 79% of young people felt that cancer had a serious impact on their emotional wellbeing, 70% experienced depression, 83% experienced loneliness, 90% experienced anxiety and 42% experienced panic attacks during their treatment. For parents, the figures are similar: more than half of parents—63%—said that they experienced depression, more than one third experienced panic attacks, and 84% experienced loneliness.

It goes without saying that surviving cancer is brilliant news. However, I urge the Minister and everyone here today to remember that although survival rates are improving, people are living with the effects, including the long-term effects, that cancer has dealt them. We must do more to ensure that patients such as Joanna, Ruth, Frances, Ciara and Chris not only live, but live well. That means taking action to improve the provision of gold-standard psychological support. Finally, I thank Anthony Nolan, CLIC Sargent, Macmillan and the Teenage Cancer Trust for their help.

5.46 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I am sure that I speak for everyone here in congratulating the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) not just on securing such an important debate, but on the bravery he showed in his speech by sharing with the House his family’s experience. It is very important that we bring the voices of the people we all seek to serve in this place into the Chamber, as well as the experiences that were shared from CLIC Sargent and Macmillan, so I thank him for that. I know that he is doing extremely good work through a number of organisations in the House to ensure that cancer patients are getting the very best treatment and support. He has also given a huge amount of support to setting up the all-party group on children, teenagers, and young adults with cancer. Although the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) has left the Chamber, I praise her work on the really good report that she and the hon. Gentleman produced. I read it last night and thoroughly recommend it to other Members.

I am standing in for the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), who has ministerial responsibility for cancer. He is very sorry that he cannot be here this evening and he was very pleased to be able to contribute to the APPG’s report. He asked me to remind the House that he has agreed to respond to everything—all the recommendations—in the report, so the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside will get a full written response from him.

I am pleased to respond on the Government’s behalf to this debate, because it brings together two vital issues, which are crucial to the health of the nation and are at the top of the Government’s priority list. Approximately one in four people in the UK experience a mental health problem every year. In England, one in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression, in any given week. Cancer affects one in two of us—there will not be anyone here this evening who has not been dreadfully affected by this disease—so it is absolutely important that the Government are focusing on these priorities.

Since 2010, cancer survival rates have been improving year on year. We estimate that some 7,000 people are alive today who would not have been here just 18 years ago, but we are not at all complacent. We know that there is more to do to make sure that our results are the best in the world. That is why last month the Prime Minister announced a package of measures, which will be rolled out across the country and which aim to see three quarters of all cancers detected in the earliest stages by 2028. The plan, backed by a record level of investment in the NHS—an extra £20 billion a year by 2023—will radically overhaul screening programmes and provide new investment in state-of-the-art technology to transform the process of diagnosis and boost research and innovation.

However, what I really want to talk about in the few moments available to me is the support that we must give to people who are living with and beyond cancer. The recovery package, which is a key component of that priority, consists of a set of four interventions that are designed to help patients and clinicians to assess patients’ holistic needs and plan appropriately for their care and support. They include a holistic needs assessment and a care plan, which guide conversations about patient’s holistic needs—not just physical and psychosocial needs, but financial, social and mental health needs. An HNA should take place within 31 days of diagnosis and at the end of each acute phase of treatment, and the care plan should be updated on each occasion. Both interventions enable patients to be referred to appropriate psychological support when necessary.

That personalised follow-up and support to help people to live well with and beyond cancer is a crucial element of the cancer strategy, and helps us to create the world-class cancer services to which we aspire. NHS England will roll out recovery packages nationwide by 2020, so that the support that they provide is available to all cancer patients in England regardless of where they live. All Cancer Alliances are receiving the necessary funding this year to support full implementation of the recovery package.

As the hon. Gentleman has said, some cancers, such as chronic blood cancers, can sadly never be cured. Blood cancer patients are frequently on a regime of “watch and wait”, often over many years, to establish...
whether their cancer has progressed to a point at which treatment needs to begin. Understandably, that can take a huge psychological toll on not only patients but their families, which is why the recovery package takes a holistic approach and fully considers the patient’s mental health needs. The package is already being commissioned and delivered, in full or in part, by many clinical commissioning groups across England, but NHS England’s aim is to accelerate the process to ensure full implementation by 2020 so that every cancer patient is given that full package of care.

Of course we need to ensure that cancer patients, and their families and carers, can access appropriate mental health services if and when they need such support, which is why the Prime Minister has made improving access to mental health services an absolute priority for her Government. There has been a fivefold increase in the number of people accessing Talking Therapies since 2009-10, and that is excellent progress, but we are not complacent; we know that much work needs to be done. In July last year, the Government announced an additional £1.3 billion to expand the mental health workforce and allow the NHS to treat an extra 1 million patients by 2020-21. That will help to ensure that cancer patients can be referred promptly to any psychological support that they need as part of their recovery package. We know that clinical nurse specialists can provide not just clinical but crucial emotional support for cancer patients as they go through cancer treatment, and—often more important—in the follow-up after their treatment.

Mark Tami: Does the Minister agree that we use the word “cured” far too often, as though there were a cut-off point when people are cured and therefore exactly the same as everyone else, and exactly the same as they were before? The problem with that is that it is not true: it does not take full account of the reality.

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman has made a very important point. That is why the tailor-made, holistic approach to treating every person as an individual is so important: no two people will respond in the same way. No two people have the same family or community support networks around them, so it must be tailored to the individual. There must also be a recognition that some people might need a lot more help over a longer period of time than others. That is why it is so important that NHS England has committed to more people having access to clinical nurse specialists, and why last year’s cancer workforce plan produced by Health Education England committed to greater investment to make sure that everybody has access to that support. There is also a great opportunity here to signpost people to be supported by the wonderful voluntary sector organisations that the hon. Gentleman mentioned this evening.

In conclusion, I want to reaffirm the Government’s utter commitment both to improving people’s survival rates from cancer and to making sure they have tailor-made, supported arrangements, including psychological services, so that people can, not just survive cancer, but live well with cancer and continue to play their full part in society.

Question put and agreed to.

5.55 pm

House adjourned.
Stalking Protection Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

Clause 1

Applications for orders

9.34 am

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 16, after “police” insert “for a police area in England and Wales”. This amendment and Amendments 2 and 6 would allow the chief constable of the Ministry of Defence Police and the Chief Constable of the British Transport Police Force to apply for stalking protection orders and interim stalking protection orders, and to take part in related procedures.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, in clause 4, page 3, line 24, leave out from “police” to the end of line 27 and insert “who applied for the stalking protection order and (if different) the chief officer of police for the area in which the defendant resides, if that area is in England or Wales.”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.

Amendment 3, in clause 9, page 6, line 2, leave out “within” and insert “before the end of”. This amendment would ensure a person can give notice that they are going to use a new name before doing so.

Amendment 4, page 6, line 8, leave out “within” and insert “before the end of”. This amendment would ensure a person can give notice that they are going to change their home address before doing so.

Amendment 5, in clause 10, page 6, line 30, leave out “whose home address is not” and insert “who does not have a home address”. This amendment would cater for the possibility that a person might not have a home address.

Amendment 6, in clause 14, page 8, line 9, at end insert—

“‘chief officer of police’ means—

(a) the chief constable of a police force maintained under section 2 of the Police Act 1996 (police forces in England and Wales outside London);
(b) the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis;
(c) the Commissioner of Police for the City of London;
(d) the chief constable of the British Transport Police;
(e) the chief constable of the Ministry of Defence Police;”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 1.

Amendment 7, in clause 15, page 9, line 4, leave out from “force” to the end of line 5 and insert “two months after the day on which this Act is passed.”

Dr Wollaston: This week we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first woman taking her seat in this House. I am immensely proud, as a Devon MP, that that woman was Lady Nancy Astor, and I think all of us in this House owe her an enormous debt of gratitude for the work she did, particularly in fighting on behalf of women and girls. I am proud that this Government have continued that work. Indeed, Members from across this whole House have done so much to advance this cause.

Of course, stalking does not just affect women—it affects men as well, and it is a vile crime of an insidious nature. I am very grateful to all those, both within this House and beyond, who have contributed to the passage of this Bill, including with advice, which has caused me to table some important amendments. They are minor in nature, but I think they will greatly improve the Bill.

Amendments 1, 2 and 6 would enable the chief constables of the Ministry of Defence police and the British Transport police to apply for stalking protection orders and interim orders, and to initiate related proceedings in connection with the variation and renewal of an order. That is because stalking occurs across a range of contexts and situations, with devastating consequences, and it is essential that a stalking protection order is available to police in a variety of situations. There may be circumstances in which the British Transport police or MOD police are best placed to seek an order, for example if the stalking conduct has taken place on the railway network or a perpetrator lives or works in MOD premises.

Amendments 3 and 4 would modify the notification requirements on a person subject to a stalking—

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend was about to move on, but I just wanted to inquire about a thing not included in this list: the Civil Nuclear constabulary. The MOD police are included, and they protect particular areas. I welcome the amendments, but is there any particular reason why the Civil Nuclear constabulary is not included?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for his point, which we could consider in the House of Lords as the Bill continues its passage.

Amendments 3 and 4 would modify the notification requirements on a person subject to a stalking protection order. Under the notification requirements, as drafted, a perpetrator must notify the police within three days of a change taking place. These amendments simply enable the perpetrator to give such notice in advance of a change taking place, and I hope that colleagues from across the House will recognise that that is a small, technical, but important change.

Finally, amendment 5 also relates to notification requirements. It caters for circumstances where the subject of a stalking protection order has no home address. In such a case, the amendment provides that the perpetrator...
can instead notify of a place where they can regularly be found. That simply mirrors notification requirements related to registered sex offenders. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) also has an amendment in this group, but I do not see him in the Chamber today, so I think we will assume that he does not wish to press that amendment. For now, I commend the amendments standing in my name to the House.

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Lady completed her speech?

Dr Wollaston indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: We are immensely grateful to her; she has been the epitome of succinctness, which serves as a useful model for other colleagues.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, a veritable slew of colleagues wishing to take part. I call Mr Alex Chalk.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What a pleasure it is to say a few words in this debate.

Before I move on to the specifics, it is important to look at some of the context, because of course it was not until fairly recently that stalking was made a crime. Before 2012, the concept of stalking was perhaps not taken terribly seriously at all—it was almost considered something of a joke—but over the past decade there has been a recognition that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, stalking is an insidious and wicked crime. I pay tribute to her work to ensure that society’s response truly fits the scale of the threat.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I was hoping to intervene on the hon. Member for Totnes, but she concluded her speech very promptly. I echo the hon. Gentleman’s sentiment—it is critical that we focus on the outcome of the Bill, which is to deal with what even for one person in this country is such an oppression that none of us in this House can really fathom it, if we have not been on the receiving end of it. Stalking can consume someone’s life and be devastating, and it can have both physical and mental health consequences, so let us not forget the victims who have to contend with stalking throughout the country.

Alex Chalk: As always, the hon. Lady makes her point extremely well—she is absolutely right. When I came into this place in 2015, I really had only the most limited understanding of what stalking was all about but, exactly as the hon. Lady indicates, it has an incredibly insidious effect.

Like so many of us in this place, the circumstances in which I came to understand stalking revolve around a constituency matter. My constituent, Dr Ellie Aston, was a local GP, and someone started to stalk her. What was worrying was the extent to which the behaviour ratcheted up from something that was initially fairly innocuous in terms of attention from a patient to something that became concerning, and then deeply troubling, as the letters multiplied, as he started to attend her home address, as he then started to attend her children’s birthday parties and when there were concerns about the gas supply being interfered with. What is so troubling is that this went on for more than seven years. When the person was arrested, the police looked into his computer and found that he had searched for “How long after a person disappears are they considered dead?” When he was released, he sent a message to the victim saying simply, “Guess who’s back?”

No wonder, then, that many victims of stalking refer to it as murder in slow motion. That might sound like an entirely melodramatic phrase, but they say it because over time their freedom and ability to go about their business starts to be eroded. They are looking over their shoulders and increasingly become prisoners in their own lives. What is so worrying is that stalking can escalate to very serious violence, which underpins why we need to take action early.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Like the hon. Gentleman, I realised the extent of stalking when people brought cases to me. I was particularly struck when it involved an ex-partner and I saw how seriously the police took it. I had a case in which the person moved, and on the day she moved in, she received a card from her ex-partner. The police said, “Well, that’s just quite a nice thing to do.” Actually, it was clearly the ex-partner saying, “I know where you live.”

Alex Chalk: That is precisely it. The weight of that experience means that something that might be perceived to be innocuous in isolation becomes a deeply upsetting episode. I shall deal with that in a little more detail in due course.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman might not know this, but I always sit in front of the memorial to my parliamentary neighbour Jo Cox. As the whole House knows, she was a victim of a type of stalking. I served on the anti-stalking commission, and that really opened my eyes to the misery of victims and the fact that very often they do not complain because they are terrified to do so.

Alex Chalk: That is absolutely right, and the hon. Gentleman will know that the rise of digital means of stalking has magnified the problem over the past decade or so. It used to be that the stalking might consist of the person turning up at someone’s home address and then doing that threatening but apparently innocuous act of driving past. Of course, people can now stalk others using multiple fake identities. I heard about an appalling case in which somebody had generated the identity of the victim’s dead partner—you could not make it up. They were seeking to harass, intimidate and upset that victim’s dead partner—none of us in this place had started to react to the issue by generating the offence of stalking, the penalties that existed for it were manifestly inadequate. The penalty at the time of only 1149, 1150 was less than the maximum penalty for the theft of a Mars bar, which is seven years, and less than the maximum penalty for non-residential
burglary—lock-up burglaries and so on—which is 10 years or so, yet stalking can genuinely ruin people’s lives. The sentence was insufficient.

9.45 am

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is obviously a great expert on these matters and I do not want to divert him too much, but while probably all of us in this Chamber have been trolled—we have probably all been trolled repeatedly, with quite vicious language at times; it is a function of being in this place—hopefully most of us have not been stalked. Surely one thing we need to be clear on is the difference between the two. Presumably the lines will blur as cyber-crime grows and that sort of behaviour continues.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend makes an acute point. We must always recogni...
Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman absolutely puts his finger on it. I will develop that point in a moment. One thing that I have experienced in my time in practice, particularly in relation to this kind of offence, is that the approach and the attitude of the officer in the case is absolutely crucial. If an officer understands precisely the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, which is that individual instances are not necessarily picked up and allows them to slide, then it can become a problem. On the other hand, if a police officer, because he has been properly trained or is particularly engaged in the case, is excellent at collating that evidence and material to build that picture, that can have a dramatically different impact, first, on the way the victim feels about it, and, secondly, on the remedy that they are likely to get.

I want to develop this other point. One thing that we have not dealt with in this piece of legislation, and that we need to go on to, is to look at the role of technology in all this. What do I mean? An individual victim will always be better and more effective at recording the litany of instances than the bureaucracy of the police. That is not a criticism of the police, but a statement, I would imagine, of the blindingly obvious. What we need to do is to put into the power of individuals the right, in appropriate circumstances, to record and list episodes as they take place. We might say, “Well, hang on, why don’t you just do that on a sheet of paper?” No, what we should be doing is potentially looking at an app, so that when the police, for example, authorise an app and say that they are going to open an investigation, the complainant or victim can, when there is an incident, record it on this app—what happened, the time that it took place and any photographs that go with it—and that can then be reviewed and assessed by police officers in due course. Otherwise, the danger is that if a person has to go down to a local police station every time their stalker walks past their house, it is terribly bureaucratic and inefficient.

I do not want to go down a rabbit hole, but there is an important role in ensuring that victims are best able to record and collate what, ultimately, will make the difference. What do I mean? An individual victim will always be better and more effective at recording the litany of instances than the bureaucracy of the police. That is not a criticism of the police, but a statement, I would imagine, of the blindingly obvious. What we need to do is to put into the power of individuals the right, in appropriate circumstances, to record and list episodes as they take place. We might say, “Well, hang on, why don’t you just do that on a sheet of paper?” No, what we should be doing is potentially looking at an app, so that when the police, for example, authorise an app and say that they are going to open an investigation, the complainant or victim can, when there is an incident, record it on this app—what happened, the time that it took place and any photographs that go with it—and that can then be reviewed and assessed by police officers in due course. Otherwise, the danger is that if a person has to go down to a local police station every time their stalker walks past their house, it is terribly bureaucratic and inefficient.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very persuasive speech. Of course, that I want to develop is the one on which I have just briefly touched. Principally, the old analogue techniques are that if somebody is robbed in the street, the police officer will say, “You are making a complaint, I understand that. Please come to the police station on a certain date and we will sit down and prepare a statement. You, the complainant, will make the allegation of what happened to you in the street. I, the police officer, will write it down. It will be in longhand, running to various sides of paper. You will then sign each page and so on.” That process could easily take an hour and a half. It then gets logged onto a system and so on.

That might be perfectly appropriate where the allegation relates to an incident that took five minutes in, say, a high street, but where the allegation relates to a cumulative total of ongoing events, innocuous in isolation but insidious in combination—to coin a phrase—we need to have a more digital approach. That is why I invite the Home Office to consider digital techniques to allow the police to work as effectively—and to take up my hon. Friend’s point—and efficiently as possible, otherwise there is, of course, the danger of resources being mopped up. The only point that I would say on this resource issue is that there can be few more compelling priorities in circumstances where the evidence suggests, compellingly, that if we do not address this behaviour early it can have very serious consequences. In other words, this is a worthy candidate, I respectfully suggest, for the prioritisation to which my hon. Friend refers.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is true to say that there are measures that could be imposed to say to a would-be defendant, “Don’t do this.” The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) talked about injunctions. It is true that there could be bail conditions further down the line, or indeed restraining orders. What this Bill does is provide for much earlier intervention. That is the critical point. It would mean that a chief police officer, under clause 1(1), could apply to the magistrates court for an order in respect of the defendant if it appears that the defendant has carried out acts associated with stalking and so on and so forth. I respectfully completely agree with the points that were made about the amendments. The reason why it is important is that a person then gets a hearing before the court in short order and it is a judicial process.

By the way, this is the other point that we need to be crystal clear about: just because we think that these allegations are serious, and just because we know that they can lead to very harmful consequences, it does not mean that we should jettison a proper judicial process. People should be made subject to these orders only if evidence is called—cogent, compelling and admissible evidence—to ensure that individuals are properly subject to these orders. We should make no mistake about this: they are deliberately onerous and deliberately restrictive, because they are designed to protect the individual,
but also, and importantly, they are designed to provide the courts with the tools they need to seek that early intervention and rehabilitation of the complainant. I am pleased to note also that duration of orders comes under clause 3, which provides that the stalking protection order has effect until a further order. In other words, if things have changed, and if as we all, I am sure, hope to get to the point where an individual defendant finds themselves rehabilitated, they can come back to the court and apply to have the order discharged if that would be the appropriate thing to do.

The point that was made very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) is about providing a new tool in the armoury. The reason why it is in the armoury, so to speak, is that there are serious consequences in the event that someone breaches it. Clause 8, which covers the offence of breaching a stalking protection order, provides a power of imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months, a fine or both.

10 am

Kevin Foster: I am finding my hon. Friend’s speech both interesting and persuasive. Does he agree that we must be very clear that these powers are in addition to the powers that the police and the courts already have, and that they should in no way be seen as an alternative? If someone has committed an offence under existing legislation with the penalties that it carries, then that should be used? This measure should be viewed as a way of protecting someone in addition to those powers, and not as a replacement in any way?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this is in addition.

Many victims have told me that by the time a perpetrator can be convicted under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, when the court says, “Yes, an offence has been committed, the defendant has been convicted and we will now impose a restraining order,” they want to say, “Well, thank you very much, but the damage has been done,” because the concerns are in place and the behaviour is entrenched. Therefore, although one would not wish for one moment to remove that power—it remains an important tool for the courts—this provision fills that gap earlier in the process.

I have spoken for far too long, Mr Speaker. [Hon. Members: “No, no!”] Hon. Members are very kind. In conclusion, we as a society have come an awfully long way on this issue, and we have done so as quickly as any other peer nation. It has been a process, and we are now close to, if not completing that process, getting to the point where these tools are available to the authorities. Ultimately, however, what will make the difference, whether in the criminal justice system or in any other part of public life, is the individuals who actually use these powers.

I wish to pay tribute to Gloucestershire Constabulary, whose police officers have put so much effort into this cause. They are leaders in their field. They have seized the baton and run with it, because they recognise the implications for people in our county—Hollie Gazzard is an obvious example, and Ellie Aston is another. Ultimately, it will be the officer who receives the complaint from the victim who, through their compassionate and organised response—I say “organised” because it is about collating so much data—will make the difference in whether justice is done. I think that that conscientious, professional officer will now have the tools that he or she needs to keep victims safe. On that basis, I am delighted to support the Bill.

Several hon. Members rose—

Kevin Foster: I must say that it makes a pleasant change to be called to speak so early in the debate, because usually I have the joy of almost having to sum up, particularly on a Friday. It is a pleasure to speak to the amendments tabled by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). It was a joy to serve on the Public Bill Committee for this important legislation, which will provide protection for many victims of stalking.

This debate is timely, given the experiences of Devon and Cornwall’s police and crime commissioner, who we have learnt has been a victim of domestic violence and stalking offences. Of course, the Bill relates more to victims who have not been in a relationship with the perpetrator, but it is very welcome that she has spoken out, and hopefully her experience will inspire other victims of stalking to realise that they need not stay silent.

Turning to amendment 1, I think that it makes eminent sense to be clear that the Bill applies to virtually every police force operating in England and Wales, and not just to the geographical police forces. The inclusion of the British Transport Police makes sense, given the obvious potential for stalking offences on public transport. For example, a stalker could follow their victim on to the train they take to work each day. Trains coming into London can be particularly crowded, and the four minutes to 4 train from Exeter to Paignton can be exceptionally crowded. That could give stalkers an opportunity to be in close physical contact with their victim. Normally that is just considered part of commuting. We have all experienced the joy of taking the tube at about 20 minutes to 9 in the morning, when the trains are packed. It is a chance to get very close to our fellow passengers, although not by choice. The inclusion of the British Transport Police is therefore welcome.

I should be clear that I support the amendments. I note that amendment 6 lists the police forces involved. That brings me to a query about whether the Civil Nuclear Constabulary ought to be included—the Minister might like to reflect on this—considering that these provisions could apply in instances where there has not been an intimate relationship. For example, someone working at a nuclear establishment could be stalked purely on the basis of their views on nuclear power generation. The same could be true for those who protect sites such as Sellafield. Or would that be an encumbrance in the legislation? That is more of a query, rather than something I think should necessarily be amended immediately.

I note that the Ministry of Defence police are included. I should explain, for the benefit of those following our proceedings—I always think that it is important to help people understand this point—that they are different from the military police or the naval provosts, who enforce military law against service personnel. The Ministry of Defence police are very visible in Plymouth, where I grew up, because of their role in enforcing the law at Her Majesty’s naval base Devonport and the submarine
refit complex. They are police officers who work with the military; they are not the military police. It is important to be clear about their role.

The Civil Nuclear Constabulary operates as a fully armed constabulary, given the nature of its officers’ work and the sites they protect, and particularly given the threat of terrorism. Again, should they be included in the Bill? I see the Minister dutifully noting down these queries, so I am sure that we will have a full response when the time comes. We should consider whether these would be useful additions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes touched on when I intervened earlier. Of course, although we in this House will complete our consideration of the Bill today, it is still to go through the other place, where this matter might be considered further.

It makes eminent sense to tidy up provisions for when someone might need to give notification and how they are to do so. The Bill needs to be robust and we must not create any loopholes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) explained in his excellent speech, because many of those engaging in this kind of behaviour not only ruthlessly work out how to intimidate their victims and gain power over them, but research the law in an effort to stay just this side of committing a criminal offence. My hon. Friend described the impact the law in an effort to stay just this side of committing a criminal offence. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes touched on when I intervened earlier. Of course, although we in this House will complete our consideration of the Bill today, it is still to go through the other place, where this matter might be considered further.

Mr Sheerman: Do we not sometimes lose sight of the overall context? In this country today, deep into the 21st century, we have a tremendous problem with violence against women. There is not just stalking; there are gangs up and down our country—gangs of men of Pakistani origin prey on young girls and even children—and domestic violence. There is a real problem in our country with violence of all kinds against women. This Bill is part of the fight to roll that back.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is right to highlight that there is a real issue. It is not just physical violence; it can be verbal violence. It is about someone trying to gain power over someone and have them under their control, whether through direct violence, intimidation or other actions, such as constant emailing or the sending of cards, as we have heard. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham made the point that sending a Christmas card might seem innocuous, but it must be seen in the context of the overall behaviour. It can be about the perpetrator being constantly in the victim’s life.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned violence against women. I am a supporter of the white ribbon campaign in my constituency, and I hope he is doing the same—I am sure he is—in his own constituency. This is about men standing up and saying that other men’s violence against women is unacceptable. I have a close relative who experienced a violent relationship for a significant period. She was physically abused—in one case, she was hospitalised by the attack launched against her—but what sticks is the constant name calling and running down. One of the points she used to make was that if someone who did not know them had observed what was going on and then asked what her name was, they would have been given not her name but two swear words put together. I do not need to repeat such language in the Chamber; Members can work out for themselves what sort of language I am referring to. She felt that that was how she would be known.

There was constant denigration and running down, and then when trying to move away from the relationship, there were constant phone calls and texts. Bluntly, it was only when BT’s choose to refuse service became available that a lot of that could finally be brought to an end through blocking the numbers. I wonder whether, if something like the Bill had been available, it might have helped to build confidence in tackling those situations.

It is right that we have clear penalties. We have been clear that this is an additional way of protecting potential victims of stalking, not about replacing existing legislation. For me, this is not just about those who have been in relationships. As I touched on in my comments about the Civil Nuclear Constabulary, such actions may in effect be stalking but are due to other reasons, such as political reasons.

Yesterday, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and the hon. Members for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), I had a very interesting visit to the Community Security Trust, which works with the Jewish community, and heard about the experiences of some of the people there. The reason for someone in effect stalking or harassing in such cases is based on their faith. Again, it would be interesting to hear what the Minister thinks about someone engaging in the completely unacceptable behaviour of targeting people for that reason, but doing so in a way that looks very much like stalking. She is an eminent lawyer in her own right—a learned Member—and I am sure she will outline how some of these powers might be of assistance.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree with me—I make this point not specifically to my own Front Benchers but about successive Governments—that although Parliament is very good at creating new laws, if money, resources and guidance are not provided, the authorities responsible for enforcing those laws cannot deliver on that, which calls the laws into question in the first place? I found that as a district councillor under the previous Labour Government and I am afraid it is happening again. I absolutely support this Bill, but there is a wider point. When Parliament passes a new law, should there be a money resolution not for the Bill to be carried forward but to make sure that it can be enforced and delivered on the ground? Otherwise, we are, I am afraid, misleading people.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for a very thought-provoking intervention. Just to be clear on the technicalities, the Bill does of course have a money resolution, because the Government have agreed to one.

Huw Merriman: Obviously, there is a money resolution to carry through the Bill, but I am talking about an ongoing money resolution, as it were, to make sure that the police have the resources to deliver it.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend is right. There clearly needs to be an intention not just to pass a piece of legislation—it makes us sound very virtuous, and we
can pop our speeches on to our websites when we get back to the office—but to ensure it has a real and clear effect. I am sure that the Minister, who I see has already made some notes, will talk about how the Home Office will seek to work with police forces to make sure this power is used and brought into effect.

I have one slight disappointment. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) was due to talk this morning on his amendment 7, which is about when the Bill will be brought into force. Again, when we move on to Third Reading—I hope the Bill will be given a Third Reading later today—it would be interesting to hear the Minister’s thoughts about when she intends to bring it into force. We do not just want to pass the Bill and then leave it sitting on the statute book, but to bring it into force.

10.15 am

Chris Philp: On the question raised by our hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill a few moments ago—[HON. MEMBERS: “And Battle.”] Let us not forget Battle. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) asked about funding. Is my hon. Friend aware that the Government intend to increase funding to combat violence against women by £100 million between now and 2020? That may go some way to addressing the concern that our hon. Friend has raised.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for yet another very well thought through and incisive intervention. I am obviously encouraged to hear that news, as I am sure Members from across the House will be. We probably should be clear that this law is gender-blind—the victim of stalking could be male or female. I remember a case in Coventry, where a male vicar was targeted by a female stalker. I absolutely welcome the funding, which is a sign of the intention to tackle a problem from which, sadly, too many women suffer. When a relationship is breaking down, or even when it is still going, it can go from love and affection to aggression, control and domination.

Huw Merriman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Foster: I will give way very briefly. I am conscious of the time, and I know that you, Mr Speaker, do not want to listen to too much of me today.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend should give himself more credit. This comes back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp). The Government of course focus resources on certain policy areas. I absolutely agree. They have spent £802 billion—that is what this Government do and they do it well—but when we state that we are spending this amount on a generic area, and that it is not ring-fenced to a particular offence or new legislation, people are somewhat left short. I am thinking of the free bus passes that the previous Government brought in. I was a district councillor, and we found that they were not funded at all, and the district councils took the rap.

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend—I visited the Battle part of my hon. Friend’s constituency, at his invitation, earlier this year—makes a valid point. When I was deputy leader of Coventry City Council, the funding for free swimming passes was distributed. Bizarrely, some councils with swimming pools struggled with the amount of funding they received, yet one council received the funding even though it did not have a swimming pool. One council got the whole funding, and another got the funding, so it was a bizarre situation.

To return to the Bill, I know that the Minister, who is in her place on the Front Bench, will be keen to reply to us to confirm how we see it being taken forward, implemented and explained in guidance. We should not get drawn into the amount of additional resource because this is also partly about the police officer who is looking for legal options to deal with a case and a victim. The Bill gives them that option. In many cases, that can be done with existing resources. It is about assisting officers in dealing with a situation that may otherwise escalate into a worse one—with a much more serious crime being committed, necessitating even more police resources—or one where they have to let it run, because at the moment the law does not quite kick in. The Bill gives officers an opportunity to make an application. I am certainly satisfied that the protection of requiring the application to be made to a court means that there will be a fair process, and this cannot just be used arbitrarily. As Members will have noticed, there is also provision for an interim order, pending a full application, if the court feels that is appropriate.

I would not necessarily say that this should be codified in an amendment, but it might have been helpful if my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch had spoken to his amendment to allow us to discuss the exact time the measure will be brought in. However, we certainly want to reflect on the fact that we need not just to pass legislation, but to provide an element of funding to ensure that it becomes of real help on the ground.

The amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes make eminent sense. They will strengthen the Bill and introduce additional tweaks to those measures introduced in Committee, and they will make the Bill even more robust as—hopefully—we send it in the not-too-distant future for scrutiny by their lordships. The Bill will be welcomed. I hope that hon. Members will support the amendments and that we will not be forced to spend time on Divisions that could otherwise be spent on Third Reading. I congratulate again my hon. Friend on the progress of the Bill so far.

James Cartlidge: It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). He said that the House probably did not want to hear more, but he does himself a disservice. I was certainly left wanting more, and I look forward to hearing him speak on other matters, possibly later today. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) for introducing this important Bill. As a child I remember being a great fan of the Sherlock Holmes series with Jeremy Brett, and the episode that scared me the most was “The Solitary Cyclist”—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins) indicated assent.

James Cartlidge: The Minister clearly shares that recollection. As a child I found the concept of a lone female on a bicycle being followed at distance by someone else on a bicycle absolutely terrifying. That was a drama, and without giving a spoiler to anyone who does not
know the story, the gentleman was not quite as nefarious as perhaps the lady had feared at the start, but in summarising the sense of fear produced by stalking, that story left an indelible mark.

I wish to refer to a specific constituency case regarding this Bill, but I will keep it for Third Reading when I hope to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, because it is more a point of principle. It is a matter that I have previously discussed with the Minister, and I think it may well be raised in another place, perhaps by Lord Deben or the newly ennobled Lord Garnier. The point is incredibly important to me personally and to my constituency, so I shall keep it for Third Reading.

Like my hon. Friend, the Member for Torbay I welcome amendment 1 on the Ministry of Defence police and the British Transport police, and I shall focus my remarks on that. South Suffolk contains the village of Wattisham. Strictly speaking the Wattisham Army airbase is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), but many service people reside in my constituency. They live either on the base or in the nearby town of Hadleigh.

To underline the importance of that base, at the Remembrance Sunday service in Hadleigh the entire regiment and town come out, and we have a fly-past by Apache helicopters. I do not know what the probability is or what the statistics are on stalking occurring in those residential homes, either within the base or for service personnel who live in town, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay that there is every reason to extend these powers to those officers because stalking could occur. Stalking is not confined to any part of society—it embraces all of society, including my constituents, and it affects men and women as both victims and perpetrators.

The British Transport police are often undervalued, but they perform a fantastic job protecting the transport network. My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay referred to being on the tube at twenty to nine in the morning, and being uncomfortably and unattractively close to people and their armpits—[Interruption.] I am sure you have experienced it too, Mr Speaker, and that is the nature of the tube at busy times. It can be quite unpleasant, but we grin and bear it so to speak. The point is that someone could be on that tube following, pursuing or stalking someone. I do not necessarily understand exactly when the order could be placed, and whether it would be done by the normal constabulary in respect of the person being stalked and their home address, or whether the British Transport police would have specific responsibility for doing that. I will leave that to finer legal minds than mine, but the logic of extending those powers seems straightforward, and I am happy to support the amendment.

I support the amendment but I have a caveat about resourcing. As the Minister will be aware—perhaps the note from the officials is on this point; I hope it is—on funding we must take rurality into account, and not just in terms of reliance on the car. I submitted a written question to the Home Office to ask whether it has considered the difference in cost between rural and urban policing, and it responded that no such study has been undertaken.
technological solutions, so that individuals are able to record and report allegations that relate to stalking or other offences, without necessarily having to make long journeys to local police stations to make a statement? Only by properly harnessing technology can the police truly build effective prosecutions that lead to justice.

James Cartlidge: I talked earlier about my lack of expertise in police matters, but of course my hon. Friend has considerable expertise on criminal law matters. I am sure he is correct about the role of technology.

10.30 am

My final point on funding relates to pensions. As I believe all hon. Members are aware, the police will be required to make additional pension contributions and they will have to be funded. There is no choice in the matter. On the strategy of using the precept, whether to raise funding for more resources to deal with stalking or any other crimes or issues that present a resource challenge to the police, it is one thing for me to say to my constituents in Suffolk, as I do, that I defend the use of the precept by saying, “You know that every pound raised is spent in Suffolk on our police”. However, if we are to raise that money and give it to the Treasury to fill a pension deficit, I think that argument becomes harder to make. On that basis, it would not be unreasonable for the centre to say, “Look, we’ve had to make an adjustment here. It wasn’t expected. Chief constables were not expecting this and therefore there should be central recompense.”

That is a pitch I make to the Minister because this is an incredibly important Bill. Stalking is a terrible crime: a crime of cowardice and bullying. On Third Reading, I will refer to a constituency case that comes under that heading. If the police are to deal with these measures will refer to a constituency case that comes under that heading. It wasn’t expected. Chief constables were not expecting this and therefore there should be central recompense.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), and in particular my hon. Friend for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), who speaks with great knowledge of these issues. I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Cheltenham articulated, in which the stalking occurs outside a domestic abuse context, or in which the perpetrator has not been intimately linked with the victim previously.

One of the Bill’s most important benefits is the fact that it transfers the onus to take action away from the victim, giving other bodies—the police and the courts—the additional tools they need to intervene in stalking cases at an early stage. The amendments will ensure that access to the new tools created by the Bill is not limited solely to local police forces in England and Wales, but given to the chief constable of the Ministry of Defence police and the chief constable of the British Transport police. It can only benefit the victims of stalking if we ensure that those other branches of our police forces are able to act on their behalf.

The technical changes made by amendments 3 to 5 put in place important safeguards that should reduce the likelihood that perpetrators of stalking could evade the Bill’s provisions. As colleagues will be aware, the Bill creates a new civil stalking protection order that will enable the imposition of both prohibitions and requirements on individuals who are deemed to be perpetrators of stalking. One of those requirements, introduced by clauses 9 and 10, is that any person subject to a stalking protection order would have to give their name and address to the police by attending the local police station and also notify the police if their address changes. There was, however, a lack of clarity in the Bill about when persons subject to an order would have to notify the police of any changes to their registered details. Amendments 3 and 4 provide important clarification by requiring individuals to give notice of their intention to change their name or address, rather than being able to inform the police after the fact.

Under the Bill as originally drafted, there was a danger that perpetrators with no fixed address could evade the requirement to register their details with the police. Amendment 5 addresses that directly by explicitly.: The House heard during our previous consideration of the Bill how the powers currently available to the police to intervene in stalking cases are insufficient. The responses to the Government’s consultation demonstrated that “stranger stalking” in particular is a form of crime that is not adequately addressed by existing laws. The passing of the Bill will send a very clear message to victims and perpetrators alike that stalking in all its forms is despicable, will not be tolerated and will have serious consequences.

Thanks to the excellent work of my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, the Bill has cross-party support, as well as the backing of the Government, so there are very few amendments for me to address at this stage. However, I would like to talk about a few. I welcome the broadening of the Bill’s scope that amendments 1, 2 and 6 would bring. We all recognise that there is a gap in the existing protective order regime, particularly in terms of provisions for early intervention in stalking cases or addressing emerging patterns of behaviour. Under the current regime, it is difficult to take any action in cases in which the criminal threshold has not yet been met, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham articulated, in which the stalking occurs outside a domestic abuse context, or in which the perpetrator has not been intimately linked with the victim previously.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is a pleasure and privilege to speak on Report. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on promoting such an important Bill. I steered a private Member’s Bill through this place in my first year as a Member, so I know the many demands that can suddenly appear in the inbox and arrive down the telephone line...
the moment one is drawn in the ballot, as there are any number of competing calls from non-governmental organisations and campaign groups. I can think of very few issues that are more worthy to pursue than the one that my hon. Friend has chosen.

It was a particular privilege to serve on the Bill Committee with my hon. Friend and to hear some of the examples from Members on both sides of the House. The core purpose of the Bill is to fill gaps in existing legislation and to ensure that our laws keep up with the changing pattern of stalking offences and developments in our understanding of them. It is a testament to the skill with which my hon. Friend has steered the Bill that it received overwhelming support from both sides of the House and that our proceedings in Committee were so straightforward. There was strong support for both the principle and the detail. She has rightly continued to work to ensure that every t is crossed and every i is dotted so that the Bill can fulfil its potential.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) in speaking very briefly to the amendments, which will make this very good Bill even better. I think that most Members will welcome amendments 1, 2 and 6 as common-sense clarifications. We would expect most applications for protection orders to involve police forces that cover geographical areas in England and Wales, but it would clearly be undesirable to allow specific cases to fall between the gaps purely because the jurisdiction they occurred under was covered by the British Transport police or the military police. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) suggested, the Civil Nuclear constabulary would be a sensible addition to those bodies, should the opportunity arise at a later stage of the Bill’s passage. Those three amendments clarify that the orders are not confined purely to what we might think of as police forces, but cover all parts of our police service.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire pointed out, when one of the core provisions of the orders is notification requirements, it is very important that those notification requirements are sensible and comprehensive. It would be frankly absurd to preclude people covered by the orders from being able to notify the appropriate authorities before they changed their name or address, but the Bill as originally drafted could easily have been interpreted as saying that the sole period within which people could make notifications was during the three days immediately after the changes came into effect. In tabling her amendments, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes has provided clarification and brought forward what most Members would see as common-sense provisions. Similarly, there is further clarification on people without a home address—particularly those of no fixed abode—and clearly, it would not fit the purpose of the Bill if orders could not apply to people in such circumstances.

I think that this is an extremely important and welcome Bill, and the amendments will make it even better. I hope to catch your eye on Third Reading, Madam Deputy Speaker, to speak about the Bill more generally.

Victoria Atkins: May I say what a pleasure it is to support the Bill and these amendments today? The whole House thanks my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) for her incredibly hard work on the Bill, helped by her members of staff. This has been a shining example of the House of Commons at its best: we have cross-party agreement; we know the direction of travel and the destination we want to get to; and we have had constructive criticism, questions and so on to help us improve the Bill. In that spirit, I thank all Members who have contributed on Report.

If I may, I will reflect on my hon. Friend’s comments about Lady Astor being the first female MP. I have the pleasure of representing a seat for which the second female MP stood—we always remember the firsts for landmark events, but we tend not to remember the second. Margaret Wintringham represented the seat of Louth in 1921. She was the first ever British-born female MP—the second ever female MP—and she took a slightly different approach to campaigning than I or any of my colleagues, because she took a vow of silence during the campaign, which might commend itself to some of us in future.

In that spirit, I welcome these modest refinements to the Bill. Amendments 1, 2 and 6 will expand the list of chief officers who will be able to apply for the orders to the Ministry of Defence police and the British Transport police—we have heard from colleagues about the benefits that this could have—and they will be able to initiate related proceedings in connection with the variation and renewal of an order.

10.45 am

I listened very carefully to the observation made by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) about the Civil Nuclear constabulary. Its role is to provide security for nuclear material and sites, and of course we recognise that that covers workplaces. I am mindful of figures that were released only yesterday by the Office for National Statistics. It compiled a bulletin of data from the national stalking helpline, which is run by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. In an analysis of the calls to the helpline, which is an incredibly important facility, it looked at the types of stalking behaviours experienced by callers who reported stalking by an ex-partner or family member, so it was restricted to, as it were, intimate relationships, as opposed to stranger stalking. None the less, I note that 4% of calls reported stalking in or through the workplace, so my hon. Friend raises a very good point regarding the Civil Nuclear constabulary, and we will look into that as the Bill proceeds through another place.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for her detailed response and agree with her proposed approach. As I said, the reason why I raised the point was that the Ministry of Defence police focuses fundamentally on securing a base, but may react to incidents on the periphery of the base. It is about the police being part of the process, but I welcome her proposal.

Victoria Atkins: Indeed, and I note that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) raised a more general point about service personnel. The Bill already covers acts of stalking by forces personnel against civilians, and stalking offences apply to service personnel automatically by virtue of the Armed Forces Act 2006. However, I will look into the points that he raised.
Stalking occurs across a range of contexts with devastating consequences. It is therefore essential that the orders are available to different police forces, and I am delighted that the amendments will help us to achieve that. While I am speaking to clause 1, and I have notified my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes about this—who knows, it may be that my legal skills are causing me to examine the text too carefully—I want to commit to clarifying the terminology in the clause, which moves between “defendant” and “person”. I want to make it absolutely clear for the police, those who litigate on their behalf and magistrates how the Bill should be navigated, so I will provide clarity on the use of terminology in the other place.

Before I move on to amendments 3 and 4, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for his speech. I will be more loquacious about his contribution to this issue on Third Reading, but I note his point about the police updating their processes to include, for example, the use of apps to help to record instances of stalking. I will explore that with the police, because it seems to be a very valid point.

I am grateful for the observations from my hon. Friends the Members for South Suffolk and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) on police resourcing. We make an economic impact assessment of the effects of any Bill, so one has of course been conducted for this Bill. I heard what they said about the police settlement, which they will both know is coming forward in December. We have managed this year to provide a further £460 million for policing, with the help of police and crime commissioners, but it is very important that we listen regarding any further support that can be given in pressing the case for dealing with the challenges of changing crime in the 21st century. The full economic impact is a reason why we have not placed a commencement date in the Bill. That point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay, and I will deal with that at the end of my speech.

Amendments 3 and 4 will modify the notification requirements on a person subject to a stalking protection order. I am pleased that they have the approval of the House. Under the requirements as drafted, a perpetrator must notify the police of a change of name or address within three days of that change taking place. It enables the perpetrator to give such notice before the change takes effect. Amendment 5 caters for circumstances in which the subject of a stalking protection order does not have a home address, and mirrors the notification requirements relating to registered sex offenders.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay examined the issue of commencement dates. We propose to deal with that through regulations, and he will know that that is the usual way of enacting provisions in any Bill that receives Royal Assent. We have gone for the traditional or usual way of commencement because we are mindful that if the orders are to be used as effectively as all colleagues wish, there will be implications for the courts, legal aid, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Prison Service and the National Probation Service, as well as the police who will require training and who will make the applications. We want to allow a little time for that to bed in, and guidance will be issued as part of that.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for the details that she is providing on commencement. Would she provide a rough timeline for the benefit of those following our proceedings? It makes eminent sense to give those organisations time to prepare, but I assume that we are talking about a matter of months, not years.

Victoria Atkins: Most certainly. My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot give precise dates, but it is certainly months. We want to get this on the statute book, and put it in force as soon as possible. We have a date for consideration in the other place early in the new year, and we want the measure to be put into force as soon as possible. May I thank all hon. Members, including my hon. Friends, for their contributions to this stage of scrutiny, and commend the amendments to the House?

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Clause 4

VARATIONS, RENEWALS AND DISCHARGES

Amendment made: 2, page 3, line 24, leave out from “police” to the end of line 27 and insert “who applied for the stalking protection order and (if different) the chief officer of police for the area in which the defendant resides, if that area is in England or Wales.”—(Dr Wollaston.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 1.

Clause 9

NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Amendments made: 3, page 6, line 2, leave out “within” and insert “before the end of”.

This amendment would ensure a person can give notice that they are going to use a new name before doing so.

4, page 6, line 8, leave out “within” and insert “before the end of”.—(Dr Wollaston.)

This amendment would ensure a person can give notice that they are going to change their home address before doing so.

Clause 10

METHOD OF NOTIFICATION AND RELATED MATTERS

Amendment made: 5, page 6, line 30, leave out “whose home address is not” and insert “who does not have a home address”.—(Dr Wollaston.)

This amendment would cater for the possibility that a person might not have a home address.

Clause 14

INTERPRETATION

Amendment made: 6, page 8, line 9, at end insert—

“‘chief officer of police’ means—

(a) the chief constable of a police force maintained under section 2 of the Police Act 1996 (police forces in England and Wales outside London);

(b) the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis;

(c) the Commissioner of Police for the City of London;

(d) the chief constable of the British Transport Police;

(e) the chief constable of the Ministry of Defence Police.”—(Dr Wollaston.)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 1.

Third Reading
10.52 am

**Dr Wollaston:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

May I begin by thanking the Minister and all her officials for the extraordinary amount of work that they have put into assisting with the Bill, and for everything that the Minister has done to progress the violence against women and girls agenda in the House? I also thank Daragh Quinn in my team for his work and for doing so much to co-ordinate and help with the preparation of the Bill. I also thank the many individuals and organisations outside the House that have made such a difference. I am thinking of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Paladin, the Gloucestershire Stalking Advisory Service, the National Stalking Consortium and many others, such as police and crime commissioners for Sussex, for Northumbria, and for Devon and Cornwall, as well as officers from Thames Valley police and Devon and Cornwall constabulary. I thank them for their valuable advice, and I also thank the stalking lead for the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

I would particularly like to pay tribute to colleagues and Members across the House for their work. Having listened to the characteristically thoughtful speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), I pay tribute to the work that he has done, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), on stalking, which has made an extraordinary difference.

**Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con):** My hon. Friend is being extremely gracious. I thank her for introducing the Bill, which undoubtedly will be of benefit to my constituents in Aldershot and Farnborough. We are very grateful.

**Dr Wollaston:** I thank everyone who has contributed today with thoughtful speeches and interventions, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), my neighbour, whom I join in his tribute to the police and crime commissioner for Devon and Cornwall for her courage in talking about her experience. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), and for Dudley South (Mike Wood), for their thoughtful interventions. I thank the hon. Members for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Croydon South (Chris Philp), and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for their ongoing and long-standing work. I greatly appreciate all the support I have received from colleagues across the House.

As we have heard, stalking is an insidious and dangerous crime with devastating consequences for victims and their families. Acts that initially appear, as we have heard, to be trivial, when seen as a whole have an extraordinary effect, not just on the individuals immediately affected but on everyone around them. Stalkers contact not just members of the family—my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham spoke about his constituent, Dr Aston—but people’s workmates and neighbours. There is a sense in which it never stops. As we heard from my hon. Friend, it is often described as murder in slow motion. It affects people’s physical and mental health, leaving them feeling isolated and fearful. It can escalate rapidly. In the context of domestic violence, about 50% of threats of violence are acted on, and there are many examples in which stalking has escalated to rape and murder.

Stalking behaviour is much more common than people realise. About one in five women and one in 10 men experience some kind of stalking behaviour in their adult lifetime, according to the crime survey for England and Wales. It typically takes about 100 episodes of stalking behaviour for victims to come forward. That is what the Bill is partly about. It is also about raising awareness and allowing this to be taken seriously. We hear time and again of people coming forward to report stalking behaviour, but it is dismissed as somehow a compliment.

**James Cartlidge:** I am impressed by what my hon. Friend is saying, as it shows the great passion that she has brought to the Bill. We would all agree that it adds huge value by protecting our constituents and bringing greater security and peace of mind to those who have suffered from this, knowing that others may be better protected in future.

**Dr Wollaston:** I thank my hon. Friend.

Raising awareness will help to encourage more people to come forward. There has been some encouraging progress. In the 2017-18 crime survey for England and Wales, there were more than 10,000 recorded offences of stalking, almost double the previous number of 5,313. The increase is likely to be due to improvements in the recording of the crime, rather than an increase in stalking. That is an important point: laws in themselves will not protect victims. A key focus is to make sure that we have better recording so that victims are more confident about coming forward. That does not mean that every instance of unwanted attention will lead to prosecution for stalking—of course not.

Stalking is a type of harassment characterised by fixation and obsession. As hon. Members have said, the Bill will allow earlier intervention, rather than allowing that to become a deeply ingrained pattern of behaviour that carries on for decades. We heard that Emily Maitlis’s stalker pursued her for more than two decades and even, disgracefully, managed to continue his behaviour from prison. There is a possibility that, if we can intervene at an earlier stage, we can stop this behaviour in its tracks, and I think that that is an important aspect of the Bill.

I pay tribute to the courage of all the victims who have come forward and spoken out. I am not talking just about celebrities; as we have heard, stalking affects people in their everyday lives, and stalking patterns of behaviour sometimes follow relatively trivial encounters. I pay particular tribute to Alexis Bowater, from my own area, for her long-standing work and her campaign for changes and increased protections.

**Luciana Berger:** I, too, welcome the courage of the people who have been able to speak out, but we should recognise that hundreds, if not thousands, of people throughout the country are unable to do so. I have heard victim impact statements read out in court from people who have not been able to come forward because the stalker’s behaviour has had such a negative impact.
that it has affected their mental and physical health, and their ability to conduct their daily lives. That has impeded them from speaking out, although they may have wanted to.

**Dr Wollaston:** That is an extremely important point. There is, of course, another group who cannot speak out: those who have lost their lives at the hands of stalkers. Some of the most moving testimonies that I heard when I was preparing the Bill have come from families who have been bereaved by stalking. I am thinking in particular of the family of Alice Ruggles. I pay tribute to all those people, and I am grateful to the Minister for meeting some of them at a roundtable. I think that we were both struck by their personal courage and bravery in trying to change a hideous experience into an attempt to protect others in the future, and I thank them all.

Another point that has been raised today concerns the growth of online stalking. There is nothing new about stalking, but, sadly, what is new is the increase in the number of avenues that are open to stalkers. That is one of the reasons the Bill does not strictly define stalking. This is a rapidly evolving, changing field, and it is important for us to retain some flexibility. The number of avenues that are open has increased even over the last few years, and if we defined stalking too tightly, we might restrict future opportunities to head off stalking behaviour. The Bill leaves the definition open, giving examples of the kinds of behaviour that could constitute stalking. As I have said before, the point about stalking is the fixated and obsessive nature of it, and the fact that it is a form of harassment. That needs to be recognised as a whole. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham made an important point when he said that an app should be considered. That would enable the full picture to be seen, and I hope that the Minister will consider adopting my hon. Friend’s welcome suggestion.

The Bill is important because it fills a significant gap in the law relating to those who are subject to so-called stranger stalking—that is, stalking by someone who is not a former, or indeed current, intimate partner. It is also important because it takes the onus away from the victim. It means that someone else can come forward to apply for a civil stalking protection order on the victim’s behalf, rather than the victim incurring a huge amount of expense and trauma in trying to establish protections on their own behalf. That is one of the key features of the Bill. Moreover, because this is a civil order, it can be imposed on the balance of probabilities—although, importantly, breaching it is a criminal offence. There are real penalties, which I think have been lacking in the past. Stalking is punishable with up to five years’ imprisonment. However, the protection order is not intended to replace a prosecution for stalking. When the criminal threshold has been met, we would expect the police and the whole criminal justice system to go down that route, but we know that a case can take time to build. The point about a stalking protection order is that it could be there while that case was being built for a full prosecution.

**Alex Chalk:** My hon. Friend is making a very important point, not least for this reason. A substantive and full prosecution could allow the court to consider the entirety of the conduct in its full context, to ensure that the punishment was truly fitting and appropriate. If the prosecution related purely to a breach of a stalking protection order, the courts might not have the powers that they required, because the offending itself would not be fully set out. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Dr Wollaston:** Absolutely. Following the important work that my hon. Friend has himself undertaken, longer sentences are available following a full prosecution for stalking. However, as he will know, it takes time to build a case, and in the meantime the behaviour is allowed to continue.

Another feature of the stalking protection order is that it has both positive and negative requirements. It is a bespoke order, so it can allow the court to include a requirement to undergo a psychiatric assessment or, if necessary, to take part in a perpetrator programme. I hope that the Minister will look into perpetrator programmes, and what we can do to ensure that more of them are available where they could help.

The Bill also makes it possible to consider the full range of stalking behaviour in imposing prohibitions. For example, much more of such behaviour now encompasses online stalking. The orders would ensure that perpetrators not only registered their names and addresses, but registered all their names and addresses, and the aliases that they used. They could be required not to have encryption software on their computers, so that it could be demonstrated whether or not they were continuing to contact their victims using another means. If, for example, they did have encryption software, that in itself would constitute a breach of the order and a criminal offence. A bespoke order allows us to be flexible about all the different methods that perpetrators are currently using.

Some people may fear that we would use the orders in inappropriate circumstances. Others have suggested to me that a person who complains of being stalked may, in fact, turn out to be the stalker. That is why this must be a very careful process, and the orders must be demonstrated to be necessary to protect. They must pass that test. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham has already pointed out, there needs to be a very effective process for people to be able to come back and challenge the orders, and that, I think, is another important aspect of the Bill.

Overall, the Bill improves protection for victims against what is a really horrible crime, which is much more common than people realise. It fills a gap in the law for those who are victims of so-called stranger stalking, and I think that it has shown the House working at its best. Colleagues on both sides of the House have recognised the gap in the law and made constructive suggestions for improving it. I am grateful to everyone who has supported the Bill and helped it to make progress.

11.9 am

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I would like to start by congratulating wholeheartedly the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who, with her characteristic diligence, perseverance and cross-party approach, has succeeded in uniting the House behind these important measures that will protect victims and save lives. I can think of few tasks more important to this House than keeping our constituents safe, and she has done all our constituents a huge service through this Bill.
We have heard the emotional and chilling testimonies of constituents who have brought their cases to their MPs. They show why this Bill is so important, and it will undoubtedly ensure better and earlier protection for victims of these terrible crimes.

Far too many stalking crimes go undetected. In 2015, there were just 194 convictions for stalking offences. Yet, the crime survey suggests that one in five women and one in 10 men will be affected by stalking in their lifetime, while the under-publicised national stalking helpline has responded to almost 14,000 calls since it was established in 2010. Clearly the conviction rate is barely the tip of the iceberg.

Providing the police with the vital additional tool of this Bill is important to protect victims, and, importantly, puts the onus and the priority on the police. The hon. Lady knows that we wholeheartedly support this Bill and will continue to do so as it makes its way through the other place.

However, as is clear from this debate, it will be important to continue to keep the measures under review and look at what more might be needed in future in order to build on this architecture to ensure long-term safety and protection for victims. There are simply too many gaps in the current legislation as it stands. With increased technology and globalisation it is important that legislation covers cyber-stalking and crimes carried out from other countries, and it is also important that measures extend to strangers.

Last year the House amended the law so that perpetrators of stalking may now receive much longer maximum sentences. We know that the way that victims are dealt with is simply not good enough, however. Charges are amended and dropped with no notice and victims can be cross-examined by their own tormentor in court. It is a matter of deep regret that the Government have failed to bring forward a victims law, as promised in successive manifestos. It would enshrine the rights of victims in law and create important new measures to support victims. If the Government chose to bring forward such a law, they would have the full support of Labour for the creation of an independent victims advocate, who would help the victim navigate their fundamental rights at a traumatic time, when the array of services and institutions they have to deal with can often be overwhelming and bewildering. The rights of victims often end up, almost unwillingly, falling by the wayside in this process.

The measures in this Bill are essential for early intervention, not just because prevention is always better than cure, but because even before arriving at sentencing, victims of stalking face additional hurdles in their treatment by the criminal justice system. It has been shocking to hear that victims experience on average 100 occurrences before coming forward to report the crime. As with all serious crime, the police and the entire criminal justice system need an integrated and informed approach if the issue is to be tackled effectively. Better detection and better treatment of victims must be their priorities. That has been very apparent in today’s debate.

This insidious form of harassment has been acknowledged and recognised only over the last few years, and the impact on, and implications for, victims and the difficulties they face in attempting to get the authorities to take them seriously has been described by several Members. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made an excellent intervention in which he compellingly described this form of crime as “murder in slow motion”. He talked about how the victim’s freedom is constantly chipped away and horrendous psychological damage caused, and the feeling that the crime will not be taken seriously by the authorities. As constituents of mine have experienced, such crimes are sometimes taken seriously only once an actual violent crime has been committed.

Despite the obvious progress made since 2012, I have repeated conversations with the police about the difficulties they face in bringing successful prosecutions. As we know, access to the police and support for victims is at an all-time low, and there is serious concern that despite all the tools the police undoubtedly now have to tackle harmful crimes such as these and crimes of domestic violence and coercive control, they do not have the resources to devote to the kind of service necessary for the support of victims and for the required level of investigation to secure a successful prosecution. The numbers of these crimes are rising year on year while prosecution rates continue to fall.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) made the important point that, with such limited resources, it is inevitable that if the police are to focus on these crimes they will devalue other areas. He said that the Government have a duty to ensure that resources are continuously available to enforce the legislation that we bring forward in this place. The police are constantly frustrated that we reach for a legislative response in dealing with serious issues and crimes while not ensuring that they have the resources on the ground to get the job done.

That issue was raised by several other Members, too. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) raised the issues that Suffolk experiences because of the funding formula; next-door Norfolk, with very similar issues and priorities, receives significantly more funding. The issue of the pensions gap was also raised, and the £165 million of further cuts for 2019-20, which is forcing police and crime commissioners to use their precept to plug the gap. The hon. Gentleman rightly said it was indefensible to ask local people to pay more in rates to plug a gap for the Treasury when that money should only be spent in the local area on local policing priorities.

Indeed, an unusually high number of Conservative Members have raised the issue of resources today and the fact that the police simply do not have the resources that need to be devoted to investigations in order to secure prosecutions for these crimes. Despite the rise in serious crime, this Government have cut the number of police officers by over 21,000 and continue to make cuts, with below-inflation budget rises even given the pension gap. Those cuts have consequences, and they are having consequences in every community in our country.

When our officers face this much pressure, it leads to the downgrading of crimes; that has been reported on a number of times over the last four or five years. To add to that, officers have not been sufficiently trained to tackle stalking crimes. That decreases the chance of prosecution even with new legislation. Police forces
need the specialist resources required to address crimes such as stalking which touch on and concern violence against women in particular.

The measures in this Bill are vital but not sufficient. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes again and all who have supported the Bill’s safe passage through the House, particularly the Minister and her officials. It is a privilege to support this Bill and I wish it speedy passage through its remaining stages.

11.17 am

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) for introducing this important Bill, and for her assiduous work in bringing it forward. I also thank Opposition Members, including the hon. Members for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) for contributing powerful arguments this morning and situating this Bill and this change in the context of a wider agenda to prevent violence against women. Today we are taking an important step to protect victims of stalking, but it will not, of course, be the final step.

One reason why I am keen to speak in this debate is that I have constituents who have been the victims of stalking; the family of Alice Ruggles, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes has mentioned. Alice was murdered in 2016 by Trimaan Dhillon, who has now been sentenced to life imprisonment. Alice’s story is a perfect example of so many of the problems that my hon. Friend’s Bill seeks to solve. Alice had twice told police that Trimaan Dhillon was harassing her. He was given a police information notice, but that did not stop his obsessive behaviour. Later, it emerged that police had previously given Dhillon a restraining order for harassing another ex-girlfriend. Alice’s family have established the Alice Ruggles Trust to make the case for changes to protect future victims of stalking, and I pay tribute to them for their incredible courage.

I am therefore very pleased to support this Bill today. It will fill a clear gap in the protective order regime and protect people like Alice in the future. It will enable effective action to be taken against stalkers whose actions are not yet provably over the criminal threshold. As my hon. Friend set out, the instrument being created today is highly flexible and will enable us to cover all the different new types of stalking behaviour. At present too many people who pose a real threat to life are simply being repeatedly cautioned and given PINs, or action is simply not taken against them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes pointed to the fact that there has been a huge increase in the registration of stalking cases, and that is welcome. It is a perfect example of the change we need in the legislative framework. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) made a powerful speech in which he talked about “murder in slow motion”, and about the fact that cases can go on for years and years.

This is a hugely important new instrument, and I hope that, as well as providing these direct benefits, its introduction will be a catalyst for the police to improve their handling of stalking cases more generally. A report published last year by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and the Crown Prosecution Service found that people who had suffered repeated harassment or stalking were frequently being let down by under-recording, by inconsistent services and by a lack of understanding in the criminal justice system.

In one of the most powerful parts of the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham, he described why these cases are so hard to tackle, and how something that can start off seeming slightly unsettling can shade off into something more sinister and then become more and more worrying. At what point do the police, who are busy all the time, take action? That is why this is such an important piece of legislation, and I hope that it will trigger police forces to review how they handle stalking and to start following the best practice guidance set out by the charity Paladin. This is a hugely important piece of legislation. It is not the end of the story, by any stretch of the imagination, but the flexibility the Bill creates will allow stalking protection orders to be useful in a wide variety of circumstances. It will improve lives and I hope that it will save lives. I support it in the strongest possible way.

11.21 am

Chris Philp: It is a great pleasure, as always, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien). Let me join other hon. and right hon. Members in extending my warm congratulations and thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who has conceived the Bill and steered it so expertly through the various stages of the legislative process. She does the whole country a great service in the work that she has done, and I am sure that all Members across the House are grateful to her for her hard work and for the expertise and dexterity that she has brought to bear in bringing this legislation almost to its final stage.

Luciana Berger: I was not going to make my own contribution today, but I should like to echo what the hon. Gentleman has just said about the cross-party spirit in which the Bill has been brought forward. It is also no mean feat to get a private Member’s Bill passed. We all know colleagues on both sides of the House who have secured their place through the ballot and presented a Bill to the House but who have not secured cross-party or Government support. I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on the fact that we are here today supporting this Bill, and I look forward to its making progress and being passed.

Chris Philp: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady’s comments. The House of Commons is at its best when we come together and find cross-party consensus on these issues. This is often evident only on a Friday when private Members’ Bills such as this are being debated. Perhaps it would be better if we could find similar common ground on other days of the week. Who knows, maybe we will do so in due course.

My hon. Friend’s Bill fills a lacuna in the current legislative framework. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) laid this out with his characteristic forensic attention to detail during his speech on Report a short while ago. He made it clear, very powerfully, that the tools available are not adequate to deal with this
particular category of emerging stalking that we are addressing today. For example, the measure of taking out an injunction in the civil court is extremely complicated and expensive, so it is unreasonable to expect a victim of stalking to have to take out their own injunction in the county court or the High Court. Restraining orders generally follow conviction, or at the very least they follow court proceedings, so that occurs only when the problem has become so serious that the threshold of criminality has clearly been crossed and, generally speaking, adjudicated on by a criminal court. Bail conditions only follow arrest. So the measures of restraining orders and bail conditions cannot be used at an early stage in the pattern of offending. That is why the measure that we are debating today is so welcome; it gives victims protection at a very early stage in the process of the offending behaviour.

In the consultation that the Government ran on this legislation, 69% of respondents felt that the current legislative arrangements were inadequate and that something more was required. There is no question but that these stalking protection orders will fill the gap identified by those respondents. The gap is powerfully illustrated by a conviction that was handed down yesterday by the Crown Court in Hove in Sussex. The defendant who was convicted was in fact a resident of my borough, Croydon, and unusually it was a female defendant. Most defendants in these cases are male. This defendant, Lina Tantash, aged 44, is a resident of Croydon and she was jailed yesterday for four years for stalking offences that had carried on over a period of 10 years. The conviction applied to three of those years. She had persistently harassed and stalked the victim by turning up unexpectedly at his place of work—even turning up at his office Christmas party—by making thousands of phone calls and by offering money to his colleagues to provide his personal mobile phone number. Eventually, the victim had to leave the country.

This was a serious pattern of behaviour that took place over many years. When the sentence was handed down yesterday, it was accompanied by a restraining order to prevent any repeat of the offence, but by then it was far too late. Had this legislation been in place some years ago, it would have been open to the victim to go to the police and ask them to seek a stalking protection order. That would have prevented the offending from getting to that serious stage and it would probably have prevented the need for a criminal conviction. It would have protected the victim, but in a sense it would also have protected the perpetrator, because they would never have reached the point of facing a four-year prison sentence. This legislation would have benefited both the victim and the stalker, because it would have prevented the stalker from ending up with a criminal conviction. One of the most powerful elements of this proposal is that it can prevent the offending from escalating in a way that is damaging to everyone.

Mr Sheerman: I have listened attentively to what the hon. Gentleman has said about that specific case. I served on the original stalking commission. Stalking is wrong, and it is women who are affected in a huge proportion of cases. Does he not think that this country should have some sort of universal Bill of Rights for women to be free from the fear of violence, whatever their ethnicity and whatever part of the country they come from.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to point out that the vast majority of victims of these terrible crimes are women. He is also right say that we should ensure that women from all backgrounds are protected. He made reference to a Bill of Rights that was gender-specific, but I believe that rights are universal and that they should be enjoyed by people regardless of their gender or race. However, his objective—that women should be completely protected—is one that I wholeheartedly agree with.

Mr Sheerman: I made a speech in Westminster Hall in 2009 about what I knew to be going on in the gangs working across our cities who were preying on women and on children in care. At that time, the police were saying to me, “Well, guv, it’s difficult. It’s expensive. And in their culture, certain things are acceptable.” No violence against women is acceptable in my book.

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There can be no excuses, based on cultural background or anything else, for the mistreatment of women in any way, whether that is stalking, forced marriage or female genital mutilation. All those things, and others, are abhorrent. No woman of any age or of any ethnic background should experience them, and categorically cultural background is no excuse; it does not make it okay.

Victoria Atkins: Hear, hear.

Chris Philp: Members on both sides of the House—and I hear agreement coming from the Government Front Bench—should all make it clear that it is totally unacceptable. There can be no excuses, and there can be no tolerance for these kinds of offences on any grounds at all. I am at one with the sentiments of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman).

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the prevalence of these offences. Indeed, there were 1,000 reported cases of stalking in London in 2017, and there may, of course, be many more that were not reported. There were a further 12,000 cases of harassment. This clearly is a wide-scale problem, and the police need to focus on it.

I am pleased to hear that the Metropolitan police—I am a London MP, so I pay particular attention to the Met—have recently set up a stalking unit, but that unit has only eight officers. Clearly, if there are 1,000 stalking offences being reported, eight officers strikes me as quite a small number. I encourage the Metropolitan police to consider increasing the size of its stalking unit, bearing in mind the scale of the problem.

This is an excellent and welcome Bill. Its provisions should in no way deter the police or the Crown Prosecution Service from pursuing prosecutions where they find evidence of criminal behaviour. This does not replace criminal sanctions; it is an additional tool that should be used at a very early stage in the pattern of behaviour.

Clause 12 provides for the Secretary of State to issue guidelines suggesting to the police how and when these powers might be exercised. It is important that the
police are proactive in this area and that, when a victim comes to the police, they respond energetically and proactively. Those guidelines are important to making sure that police forces across the country actually use these powers. This worries me sometimes. We pass legislation in this Chamber on all kinds of topics, but legislation is impotent and ineffective unless it is used and implemented by the public bodies it empowers. In this example, it is critical that the police actually use this legislation when they are approached by victims, and the House should keep a close eye on it to make sure that, once this legislation becomes active, it is used by police forces across the country.

Mr Sheerman: A chief constable told a group of us only two weeks ago that the Crown Prosecution Service is very restricted in resources at the moment in taking cases forward. That was the police saying, “We can’t get the action because the CPS is in that position.” The budgetary concerns are broader than just the police.

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting that concern on record. As we go through the comprehensive spending review next year, teasing out departmental spending limits for the four or five years to come, it will be a good opportunity for Members on both sides of the House to make submissions to the Treasury on such issues to make sure that the resources are in place to enable the CPS and the police to prosecute people, as appropriate.

My last observation, in passing, is that I notice there is no formal definition of stalking in the Bill or in the interpretations at the end. When stalking is referred to, it is with a lower-case s. Stalking does not seem to be formally defined. I consulted my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham, who drew my attention to the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, which lists some examples of stalking behaviour, but again it does not provide a precise definition. I wonder whether at some point, in future legislation, it might be worth our creating a more formal definition of what constitutes stalking to help police forces and the CPS in their work.

This is an excellent Bill and, again, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes on her fantastic work, her legislative dexterity and her perseverance in getting this Bill to Third Reading. The Bill fills an important gap in our current legislative framework. I am delighted to give it my enthusiastic and vocal support and, if necessary, to support it in the Lobby.

11.34 am

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on bringing this important Bill to this advanced stage. My only disappointment is that, in its current form, it does not apply to Scotland.

In Scotland stalking is covered under the Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010, section 39 of which includes some of the measures we discussed this morning. Section 39 specifically mentions conduct, especially the different kinds and modern forms of stalking. The conduct defined in that Act includes: following someone; contacting or attempting to contact them by any means; publishing material relating to, purporting to relate to or purporting to originate from them; monitoring their use of electronic communication; entering premises; loitering in any place; interfering with their property; watching or spying on them; or acting in another way that a reasonable person would expect to cause the victim to experience or suffer fear or alarm.

The 2010 Act has no provision for a stalking protection order, which my hon. Friend seeks to introduce today. If the Bill is successful, we can work with colleagues in the Scottish Parliament to make sure there is equality of law and equality of the protection of rights across the United Kingdom.

This truly is a British problem. In 2017-18 there were 1,376 reported cases of stalking in Scotland, up from 495 in 2011-12—a 170% increase in the incidence of stalking. I know from the personal experience of constituents coming to my office that geography is no hindrance to such crimes, and it is important that, across the United Kingdom, our citizens have the same rights and protections.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke on Report about the British Transport police—an issue that has been a bone of contention back home and has been debated here and elsewhere. It is particularly important that these powers include the British Transport police, because these crimes have no respect for geography. He accurately highlighted that busy commuter trains and other forms of transport are where individuals can be at the greatest risk, especially in this day and age when a mobile phone can be used to take a picture or a video of someone sitting on a train, reading a paper in a tube carriage or doing anything else on public transport.

That is another realm of risk, and many years ago, or even in the 2010 Act, we would not have appreciated the current extent of that risk. Including the British Transport police and making sure we have a co-ordinated and joined-up approach across the United Kingdom are both important.

Many Members have spoken today about their experiences as Members of Parliament, and about the experiences of their constituents. A number of constituents have approached me with varying degrees of relationship and other issues, and whether they go to the civil courts or cross over to the criminal courts, it is important that, as always, a very wise contribution that is very welcome.

As I was saying, it is important that the protections are there for these individuals, which is why I started my speech by talking about the different forms of conduct. It is important that we consider the breadth of conduct.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who talked about a definition of stalking. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) has just raised that matter again. The real problem sometimes is that what seems innocuous to most people presys the mind of the person who is being stalked, so a little thing that we may think is nothing actually has a huge impact. That is one of the problems of defining stalking.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend, who makes, as always, a very wise contribution that is very welcome. As I was saying, it is important that we protect these individual rights and make sure that, no matter how
seemingly innocent these actions are, people have the right protection so that the experience is right for them because it is about their own fear of harm and harassment.

I welcome the provisions to extend this to the British Transport Police and to make sure that the protections for individuals are there. I hope that, if my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is successful with the Bill, she will work with colleagues in the Scottish Parliament as well to make sure that we have equal rights across our United Kingdom.

11.40 am

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham). Although this Bill does not apply to Scotland, it is great to see representation for Scotland in the debate—and eloquent representation it was, too.

It is a pleasure to join other Members in supporting my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). Sometimes, I feel, we do not agree on other subjects, so it is excellent to be able to contribute to a debate in which we are perfectly aligned, the alignment being not just on our side of the Chamber but on both sides.

We have heard some excellent legal minds give their insightful view on this Bill, so I want to adopt a slightly different approach and use the latitude that is sometimes afforded to us on Fridays to give a public information broadcast. First, anybody who is at risk of stalking, experiences stalking or has family members who are being stalked should contact the national stalking helpline on 0808 802 0300. That line is run by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. The interesting thing about it is that it is a freephone number from landlines, but it also free from a number of mobile service providers. Also, the number will not show up on someone’s phone bill if they are phoning from a BT line, which might be important for some people who are concerned about stalking and do not want information to be shown on their telephone bill.

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust is a great source of information on stalking. Let us just briefly remember why the trust was set up. Suzy Lamplugh was 25 years old in 1986 when she disappeared, and her parents, Paul and Diana, set up the trust to provide incredible support to people who are victims of the type of terrible tragedy that they have experienced and to others who are victims of stalking. The trust receives money from the tampon tax fund, from which the Government contribute approximately £15 million a year, using money taken from VAT on sanitary products to support organisations that provide support for disadvantaged women. The trust is one of a number of organisations that that supports. It is a fantastic charity. Suzy Lamplugh was very tragically in the news most recently because police excavated the site of John Cannan’s mother’s house to try to finally find evidence to attribute the crime to him.

The trust is not the only charity that provides support in this field. In preparation for this debate, I also came across the Hollie Gazzard Trust. Last night, I tried to download the Hollie Guard app, which I thought I might be able to utilise to offer some feedback to the House on its efficacy or otherwise. Unfortunately, it is necessary to register to use the app and I am still awaiting notification that I can be registered as a user. However, I believe that it provides a valuable tool. If someone is walking home and feels that they might be vulnerable, the app enables them to register their start and final destination. It will track their progress and, if they do not arrive at that destination within a prescribed time, it can alert people they have predetermined from the contacts in their phone. It can also turn the phone into an alarm so that it gives out a high-pitched noise and the torch comes on as well to attract attention.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the research and finding out about that. I know Nick and Mandy Gazzard, the parents of Hollie Gazzard, and they will be absolutely thrilled to hear that he has, first, researched it, and secondly, accurately identified precisely what it does. Good for him—I am very grateful.

Eddie Hughes: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I would like to further endorse the work of Nick Gazzard. In December last year, West Midlands police operated a Facebook page where people could type in comments if they had concerns about stalking, and Nick was responding to those comments with Detective Inspector Jenny Bean from West Midlands police. He is doing incredibly valuable work and supporting people, following the terribly tragic circumstances of his daughter’s death in February 2014. The joint report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and the CPS inspectorate identified 112 stalking cases that were not dealt with correctly, and in 60% of cases a risk assessment was not prepared. Clearly there is some work to do, but it certainly sounds as though West Midlands police are doing their best to make sure that they address this.

I would also like to mention Black Country Women’s Aid, which set up a stalking support service in January this year, also funded by the tampon tax fund. I thank Lorraine Garratley for her support and the information that she has provided me with in preparing for this debate. The group provides support for women and young girls over the age of 13 to help them through this difficult experience.

Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes. I completely endorse this Bill.

11.46 am

Nigel Huddleston: I, like every Member in this House today, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) for bringing forward this Bill. I pay tribute to the work done by the Ministers, officials and many people across both sides of the House in making sure that this happens. I look forward to voting in favour of the Bill in a short while.

As I said on Report, stalking is an abhorrent behaviour, and its victims often suffer devastating consequences that should not be underestimated. It has widespread ramifications for the victim. It not only severely impacts their mental state but can affect their careers, their relationships, and so many other things. The relentless nature of stalking, often over a period of many years, can leave the victims feeling absolutely helpless. This is exacerbated by the high threshold that must be met under the current regime for police to be able to intervene. There are many improvements in this Bill that will change things substantially.
Stalking is commonly misunderstood. Reporting unsolicited advances or a bombardment of messages can seem trivial if not considered as part of an overall pattern of harassing behaviour. Some victims have said that they were made to feel as though they were overreacting, or even wasting valuable police time, when trying to report their experiences. As one constituent of mine said about their own experiences of being stalked: “No one considers me seriously. There is no emergency but I am living with things that I simply should not have to live with.”

We should also remember that stalking can be a gateway to other criminal behaviour and often escalates, sometimes to the point of rape and murder. I welcome the fact that this Bill makes it clear that, where the police are empowered to apply for a stalking protection order on the basis that it is necessary to protect a person from risk, this risk can be of either physical or psychological harm. The risk element is key. Much progress has been made on the reporting of stalking offences over the past few years, but much more needs to be done. Although the number of recorded stalking offences has trebled in England and Wales since 2014, prosecution rates have significantly declined. It is clear that there is a gap in the law and the powers available to the police are not sufficient to tackle stalking in its various forms. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said, an astonishing one in five women and one in 10 men have experienced stalking behaviour in their lives, and this Bill will help police effectively to address the huge volume of cases that have not become criminal but are nevertheless emotionally traumatic for the victim.

Bob Stewart: Does my hon. Friend have any idea why there has been a trebling in the amount of stalking in England and Wales?

Nigel Huddleston: I suspect that there is a problem between the stalking and the reporting of it and, in some ways, a higher level of reporting is a good thing because it means that more people are coming forward with their concerns. I do not think we will ever be able to get a fully accurate record because there will always be situations and circumstances where some people, for whatever reason, do not wish to report.

Bob Stewart: People are just coming forward more.

Nigel Huddleston: Yes, but the more willingness to report there is, the better.

Mr Sheerman: Three or four years ago, the stalking commission looked at this issue. Anonymity and social media are very much at the heart of this, as there is this wicked ability for people to insinuate themselves into someone else’s life anonymously through social media. The people who run social media have a lot to answer for.

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman is making a valid point, and I certainly hope that the online harms White Paper, which will be coming out before the end of winter, will address some of these issues, too. I understand that the White Paper is being produced jointly by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Home Office, and I am sure this will be much debated again. The social media companies have a lot of power and a lot of responsibilities, but they have to take those responsibilities seriously.

I spoke earlier about the dangers of stranger stalking and I will not repeat those comments now. I just want to say in conclusion that this Bill sends a clear message that stalking is a crime that the Government take seriously and that all of us in Parliament take seriously. It has a devastating impact on people’s lives, and I fully support all the measures in the Bill.

11.51 am

Victoria Atkins: I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on successfully steering this important Bill through the House. May I also take this moment to pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), both of whom have done so much work over the past few years to ensure that those who are convicted of the terrible offence of stalking meet the justice they deserve? My thanks also go to Conservative colleagues, and to colleagues from across the House, many of whom speak to me quietly behind the scenes about cases that concern them and that their constituents have suffered. Those Members know who they are, and I thank each and every one of them for their help.

Stalking is a terrible crime that still affects literally millions of people and often makes their lives a misery. The title of last year’s inspection report, “Living in fear”, sums up well what it feels to be as a victim of stalking. I am proud of the actions that this Government and their predecessors have taken to reduce that fear, from the original Protection from Harassment Act 1997—we heard from the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) about the role he played in that—to introducing the specific stalking offences in 2012 and the funding we have given to the excellent national stalking helpline.

At this point, may I just thank my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) for his speech, which was public service broadcasting at its best? He made the important point that there is help available, albeit we sometimes need to search for it, and that it is something that I have very much taken away with me. That helpline has helped almost 14,000 callers since 2010, as the shadow Minister said, and 94% of those callers say that they feel better about their situation immediately after making contact with that helpline. There is clearly a need, and the helpline is playing a huge role in helping victims.

Other projects are going on across the country to deliver innovative solutions to tackle this terrible crime. The Metropolitan Police Service, in partnership with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, has received more than £4 million from the police transformation fund for a multi-agency stalking interventions programme to share best practice and learning on developing interventions to tackle stalking. Northumbria has received more than £600,000 under the violence against women and girls service transformation fund for the Northumbria Building Capability project, which includes a specific project on cyber-stalking. Several projects to tackle stalking are funded through the tampon tax fund, including the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, which has received money to scale up its casework support service for women who are being stalked. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North mentioned Black Country Women’s Aid, which has received more
than £200,000 to pilot the first specialist support service for victims of stalking across the Black country area and to conduct research on stalking.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), with whom I work on other campaigns, made a brilliant public service broadcast, but one thing he missed out was saying that when people are in trouble with stalking, MPs can help. MPs and our staff are very skilled at helping—we know about stuff—so please let us not underrate the job that MPs can do.

Victoria Atkins: I very much agree. Cross-party co-operation really can and must happen on such issues. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that Members of Parliament can do a great deal to help, and I thank him for his work on this topic.

A project called YOU Trust is another example of work to help to tackle stalking specifically. It provides a victim support service to women who experience stalking, risk assessing all cases and delivering solutions appropriate to that risk. We are working closely with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and other partners to raise awareness of stalking and to ensure that appropriate guidance and training are in place. Colleagues have been right to express concerns about the initial response and to those, so I shall move on quickly.

I acknowledge the observations of my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who both referred to the breadth of practices in stalking behaviour. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay mentioned specifically conduct against people’s political and religious beliefs, which was of course a very valid point.

At this point, may I also thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who is no longer in the Chamber? I look forward to joining her on Monday in this place for a day of commemoration and solidarity against those who continue to behave disgracefully towards Jewish people and to give support to the Jewish community.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I just want to put it on record that there is cross-party support for this excellent Bill. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on introducing it.

The Minister mentioned behaviour. Surely one thing that we should be looking at is educating people about the behaviour that leads to stalking. Does she have any thoughts about what can be done to educate people to stop them stalking in the first place?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Again, I am happy to acknowledge the work, co-operation and collaboration on the Bill of Members across the House, for which I thank them. There are a number of projects, some of which I have already referred to, including in London with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, to help to intervene with perpetrators as well as to support victims. I hope that one of the most exciting aspects of the Bill is the potential for positive as well as negative requirements under the orders, such as requiring the perpetrator to seek mental health treatment if that is appropriate. I hope that the orders will bring about innovative thinking that is very specific to the person against whom the order is applied to help them to tackle their behaviour so that they do not continue to offend.

We all acknowledge that there has been a gap in the system, as was revealed in the public consultation in 2016, particularly around how to bring security to victims in the early stages of so-called stranger stalking. Early intervention is always important when tackling crime, but it is fundamentally so in the case of stalking, when apparently innocuous behaviour can often escalate into something more sinister, as hon. Members have been very good at describing today. I am delighted that this Bill will plug that gap and provide additional security to victims.

These orders will be a vital tool that the police can use to protect victims and to control the behaviour of perpetrators. As has been noted, one of their greatest virtues is their flexibility, permitting positive and negative requirements that will help to stop perpetrators from behaving as they have been. Of course, the ultimate sanction is available through criminal sanctions should people breach the terms of these orders.

Stalking can have devastating effects for women and girls; indeed, it can for men and boys as well, but we know from the evidence that the vast majority of victims...
are female. This measure will, I hope, be passed by the House just two days before the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, which is on Sunday.

The Government are carrying out a whole raft of work on tackling violence against women and girls, not least by refreshing the VAWG strategy alongside introducing the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, which I hope to bring to this House before not too long.

I must finish by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes for introducing the Bill, the officials who have advised me and who have worked so hard on the Bill, and hon. Members across the House for their help with the Bill, including those who served on the Bill Committee.

I finish by reflecting on the people whom this Bill seeks to protect: the victims of stalking and their families. My hon. Friends the Members for Totnes, for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), for Cheltenham and for Walsall North, as well as other Members, referred to families who have lost loved ones as a result of stalking. I have had the privilege of meeting Mr and Mrs Ruggles, Mr Gazzard and others during the passage of the Bill and through our work more generally on stalking and harassment in the Home Office. This Bill is for them. It is to protect their families, their friends, their work colleagues and so on, and it is about trying to ensure that the terrible, terrible cases of stalking that we have heard just a little about today do not happen in future, and that we keep the victims of stalking safe.

12.4 pm

Dr Wollaston: I thank the Minister, her officials and Members on both sides of the House. This debate has shown Parliament at its best. I look forward to the Bill making progress in the other place, and I thank Baroness Bertin for taking it forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Parking (Code of Practice) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I inform the House that the Scottish Parliament has approved a legislative consent resolution relating to the Bill, which is available in the Vote Office.

New Clause 1

APPEALS AGAINST PARKING CHARGES

‘(1) This section applies if the parking code contains guidance recommending that all parking appeals are dealt with by a single person who is independent of persons providing private parking facilities.

(2) The Secretary of State may, for the purpose of enabling or facilitating persons to act in accordance with that guidance, enter into an agreement with any person who appears to the Secretary of State to be so independent for that person to deal with parking appeals.

(3) An agreement under this section may provide—

(a) for payments to be made by the Secretary of State in respect of dealing with parking appeals;

(b) for the person to have power to charge fees, payable by persons providing private parking facilities, for dealing with parking appeals;

(c) for the maximum amount of any fee chargeable by virtue of paragraph (b).

(4) A person authorised by an agreement under this section to deal with parking appeals may not authorise any other person to perform that function.

(5) In this section “parking appeals” means appeals against parking charges imposed by, or on behalf of, persons providing private parking facilities.’.—(Sir Greg Knight.)

The new clause provides that, if the parking code recommends that all appeals against parking charges are dealt with by a single independent person, the Secretary of State may enter into an agreement with such a person for that person to deal with appeals against parking charges.

12.5 pm

Brought up, and read the First time.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 7, in clause 1, page 1, line 3, after “State” insert “within twelve months of the day on which this Act is passed.”

Amendment 8, page 1, line 3, after “must” insert “use his best endeavour to.”

Amendment 1, in clause 6, page 3, line 14, leave out from “may” to “functions” in line 20 and insert “—

(a) enter into an agreement with a public authority authorising the authority to perform any functions of the Secretary of State under sections 1 to 4 (other than the function of laying a code or alteration before Parliament);

(b) enter into an agreement with a person authorising that person to perform any”

This amendment enables the Secretary of State to delegate functions relating to the investigation of breaches of the parking code to bodies that are not public authorities.
Amendment 2, page 3, line 28, leave out “public authority which is” and insert “person”

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 3, page 3, line 34, leave out “the final version of”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 4, page 3, line 35, at end insert “for approval”

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 36, leave out “The” and insert “Once the Secretary of State has approved the code or alteration, the”

Amendments 3 to 5 make clear that, where the Secretary of State has delegated the function of preparing the parking code, the Secretary of State must approve the final version of the parking code (or any alteration to it) before it is laid before Parliament.

Amendment 6, in clause 7, page 4, line 3, at end insert—

“(1) where the Secretary of State has entered into an agreement with a person under section (Appeals against parking charges), the establishment and maintenance by the person of a service for dealing with parking appeals (within the meaning of that section).”

The effect of this amendment is that, where the Secretary of State enters into an agreement with a person for the person to deal with appeals against parking charges (see NC1), the costs of establishing and maintaining that parking appeals service may be defrayed out of the proceeds of the levy imposed on accredited parking associations.

Amendment 9, in clause 11, page 6, line 29, leave out from “force” to the end of line 30 and insert “two months after the day on which this Act is passed.”

Amendment 10, page 6, line 31, leave out subsection (3).

Sir Greg Knight: Following previous stages of our consideration of the Bill, and having received a number of representations, it is apparent to me that it can and should be strengthened further. One point of concern that has been raised, including by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), relates to the appeals services available to motorists. Currently, when a motorist receives a ticket, they must first go to the parking operator to challenge it. If the challenge is rejected, they may go on to an appeals service provided by whichever accredited trade association the parking operator is a member of. Parking on Private Land Appeals and the Independent Appeals Service are the appeals services of the British Parking Association and the International Parking Community respectively. However, POPLA does not operate in Scotland, so motorists who receive parking tickets from British Parking Associations in Scotland are denied an independent appeals service entirely, which I do not think is right.

The Bill provides an opportunity to raise the standards of the private parking industry and create more consistency in the process. My amendments would expand that opportunity, providing the Secretary of State with the power to appoint a single appeals service for the whole industry, providing greater consistency for motorists in England, Scotland and Wales, as they would know exactly where to go when they want to appeal a private parking ticket.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): May I be the first to congratulate my right hon. Friend on piloting his Bill thus far? Many of our constituents who are caught up in these schemes are among the most vulnerable. Will he reassure my constituents who have been caught up in the past that in future they will be able to go through a much clearer and more straightforward process?

Sir Greg Knight: I am happy to give that assurance and to confirm that the appeals process will be free of charge.

The new clause and amendment 6 are the substantive amendments and would allow the Secretary of State to appoint a single appeals service for the private parking industry. They would also amend the proposed levy powers in order to use the levy to cover the costs of establishing and maintaining such an appeals service. Amendments 1 to 5, which also stand in my name, are largely technical and would amend the Bill to allow the Government flexibility to delegate their functions for investigating breaches of the code. They would also ensure that, where the Secretary of State has delegated the function of preparing the code of practice, they must still approve the final version of the parking code.

The current provisions mean that the Minister can delegate only to a public authority, but my amendments would allow the delegation of the investigatory function to private bodies. That would allow subject matter experts from the private industry to conduct the function, thus offering a greater range of options and value for money. Lastly, my final amendments cover where the Secretary of State has delegated the code of practice, as I have said, but is still required to give final approval to it. I commend my new clause and amendments to the House.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I commend the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) for his Bill and for the very sensible amendments that he has brought before the House. I assure him that I am not going to speak at length. I rise at this stage just to congratulate him and to assure him that he has the full support of Her Majesty’s Opposition.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I address some remarks to the amendments in my name, particularly amendments 7 and 8 to clause 1? Like everybody else in the Chamber, I think this is a really good piece of legislation, but it is dependent on the good will of the Government to ensure that something actually happens.

Too often, we pass legislation in this House, and months or years later we find that nothing much has happened as far as the Government are concerned. I give as an example the primary legislation passed in this House to limit public sector exit payments to £95,000. That was contained in the Enterprise Act 2016. The Government have still not implemented that provision. Despite promises more than a year ago that they were about to bring forward regulations, they have not even fulfilled those promises. The most recent information I
have is that there will be a write-round before Christmas, and then they may have a consultation on the regulations next year. When the Government say, “Yes, we’re definitely going to do something about this”, as they did when that law was passed, there is quite often a gap between what is said and the reality.

It is against that background that I am seeking, in amendments 7 and 8, to tighten up the requirements on the Government to bring forward the code of practice. Currently, all the Bill says is: “The Secretary of State must prepare a code of practice containing guidance”. However, he may not prepare that code of practice for many months or many years, and we should learn from past mistakes.

Sir Greg Knight: May I just say to my hon. Friend that so far, throughout this whole process, I have found the Government very helpful, with no sign of procrastination? Indeed, they have been very astute in already seeking views and starting the consultation process, with a working group looking at some of these aspects. I am certain his fears are unfounded.

Sir Christopher Chope: I hope that is so. One way of establishing that my right hon. Friend is right would be if the Government readily accept amendments 7 and 8. Doing so would reinforce the good will of the Government in ensuring that they will bring forward their parking code in good time.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): A time limit could be put into the legislation so that by such a time this should be done.

Sir Christopher Chope: That is exactly the purpose of my amendments. Amendment 7 would insert, in the first line of clause 1, that the Secretary of State, “within twelve months of the day on which this Act is passed”, must prepare a code of practice. That is pretty clear in bringing in a time limit and a requirement. I hope the Minister will be able to give an undertaking that the Government will bring forward a code of practice within 12 months. Some people may be impatient and say that they want it sooner, but under the terms of the Bill the Government have to consult before producing a code of practice, so I think it is reasonable to allow a period for the code of practice to be drawn up and consulted on.

If that amendment goes too far and is too extreme for the Government, amendment 8 is a modification as it would mean that the Secretary of State must “use his best endeavour” to prepare a code of practice. I do not know whether the Minister will say that those words are a meaningless addition, or that they would impose too tight a legal requirement on the Secretary of State.

12.15 pm

Michael Tomlinson: As always, my hon. Friend and neighbour considers these matters carefully, and I am listening carefully to his proposals. Given that the Bill’s sponsor has received reassurance on this point, surely the phrase “best endeavour” would be otiose, because the Government and the excellent Minister have said that these things will be brought forward. We simply do not need those words.

Sir Christopher Chope: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly fair point, and I have tabled the amendment as a fall-back position—[Interruption.] Not a backstop, no. The amendment is a fall-back in case the Government do not accept amendment 7.

Sir Greg Knight: May I say gently to my hon. Friend that if his amendments are accepted, they may cause some difficulty? If the Bill becomes law, the Government will need to go through a procurement process, which will take several months. The arbitrary time limit that he seeks to impose might mean that that procurement process could not properly take place.

Sir Christopher Chope: With the greatest respect, perhaps my right hon. Friend’s point is relevant to my other amendments that relate to the time the Act must be passed. I do not see how having to go through a procurement process will interfere with the code of practice, unless the Government propose to delegate the drawing up of that code to some consultant—[Interruption.] My right hon. Friend says that the Government might want to do that. They might also feel the need to comply with the European Union procurement directive on this matter, but that is speculation.

My right hon. Friend has been, not obsessed, but very concerned about the abuse of private parking facilities for a long time, and this is a great opportunity to get legislation on the statute book and get something done. However, I say to my right hon. and hon. Friends who have great trust in the Government, that even if the Minister does not obstruct the Bill and exercises good will, as we have seen with public sector exit payments, there can be a big gap with those good intentions. I think the whole House supported the idea of a £95,000 cap on exit payments, yet two and a half years later there is no sign of that coming into effect, and the latest projection is that it will be sometime next year.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On amendment 7, how will the Secretary of State be judged on the requirement to “use his best endeavour” to carry this out within 12 months?

Sir Christopher Chope: That very challenging question is not dissimilar to the questions that I asked the Government and Prime Minister about what enforcement mechanism there will be to ensure that “best endeavours” as referred to in the withdrawal agreement will be implemented. In answer to a parliamentary question from me, the Minister replied on 22 November:

“The reference to best endeavours in Article 184 of the Withdrawal Agreement is a legally binding commitment that requires the United Kingdom and the EU to conduct themselves so that the negotiations on the future relationship are meaningful. It prohibits inflexible or obstructive behaviour and obliges the parties to pay reasonable regard to the interests of the other party.”

So in answer to the hon. Gentleman, that is the precedent that would be established. If he thinks that that is full of clarity, then I am sure he will be eager to support my amendment.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Presumably, whether best endeavours have been followed in the Brexit negotiations is likely to capture slightly more
media coverage than whether best endeavours have been used in the introduction of the civil car parking code of practice.

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: With the greatest respect, I do not understand why my hon. Friend says that. According to the Government, “best endeavours” is a legal term, so why can we not incorporate it in the Bill in the same way that it has been proposed that it should be incorporated in the EU withdrawal legislation?

KEVIN BRENNAN: My point is that in this instance best endeavours would always be in the eye of the beholder. The hon. Gentleman does not explain, in his amendments, how Ministers could be judged on whether they had used their best endeavours and what the consequences of any such judgment would be. Therefore, as an amendment—I know he is very careful about these sorts of things—it does not survive minimal scrutiny.

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: In my submission, if an aggrieved member of the public felt that the Government had not been using their best endeavours to bring forward the code of practice and were thereby delaying the implementation of the will of Parliament, it would be open to that person to raise the matter by way of a judicial review, so there would be an enforcement mechanism.

ALEX CHALK (Cheltenham) (Con): Is this amendment not a licence to take power away from this House and put it into the courts? This House should be responsible for its own legislation. If there had been a failure of a dilatory nature from the Government, then my hon. Friend could no doubt call them to account in this House. However, ceding power to the courts to make a decision on whether best endeavours have been used seems to me to be a complete abdication of responsibility.

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: What my hon. Friend says is interesting if one applies the analogy of best endeavours to what is being discussed in the context of article 184 of the EU withdrawal agreement. In answer to another parliamentary question, the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) the Minister with responsibility for exiting the European Union stated: “the primary remedy would be that the party in default would be obliged to return to the negotiating table and modify its position. In the event that there was further non-compliance, remedies may be imposed under the processes established by the withdrawal agreement.”

It may be that my amendment is just as weak as article 184 of the proposed EU withdrawal agreement seems to be.

KEVIN BRENNAN indicated assent.

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: I see the hon. Gentleman is expressing his strong agreement.

SIR GREG KNIGHT: I think my hon. Friend is seeing shadows on the wall where they do not exist. The Government have made it quite clear that they are very supportive of the Bill. If I give him an undertaking to harass the Minister and make his life a misery if I think he is dragging his feet, will my hon. Friend agree not to press his amendments?

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: Is my right hon. Friend saying that he himself will undertake to harass the Minister? I am afraid that in the past my efforts at harassing the Government have proved manifestly unsuccessful. Of course, my right hon. Friend carries with him the distinction of being a former Deputy Chief Whip, so perhaps he has more influence than I have.

KEVIN FOSTER (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend should not be so dismissive of his own impact. As he will know, I was a sponsor of the Middle Level Bill, which is now the Middle Level Act 2018. His dutiful use of the procedures of the House ensured that it was a changed Bill. We do not necessarily need this at the moment, because we can rely on him being a dutiful parliamentarian, scrutinising constantly and ensuring that the House holds the Government to account for implementing the law that is passed.

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: Gosh, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am being flattered into submission. Perhaps this is an appropriate moment to say that the Government have also conceded on the amendment that my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and I tabled saying that we need more Fridays on which to consider private Members’ Bills. That amendment has been accepted by the Government, and I understand that they are going to put forward a motion for debate on Monday that incorporates it. I can accept—

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER (DAME ROSIE WINTERTON): Order. It is important that we stick to the amendments in front of us rather than what might be amendments elsewhere in future debates.

SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE: I shall use my best endeavours to comply with your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I think that was a useful walk around amendments 7 and 8. Let me refer briefly to the other amendments in my name, which deal with when the Bill has to be enacted. At the moment, clause 11, on the commencement, extent and short title, says that “section 8” and “any power to make regulations” will come in “on the day on which this Act is passed”. However, the clause also states that the “remaining provisions of this Act come into force on such day as the Secretary of State may by regulations appoint.”

My amendment suggests that that should be two months after the day on which the Act is passed, again to ensure that the pressure is kept on the Government to bring the measures forward as quickly as possible. There is massive public demand for them, and I fear that if we do not tie the Government’s hands a bit more than the Bill does currently, we may have to rely, to a very great extent, on the muscle power of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire. I do not really think we want to have to do that, which is why I tabled the amendments. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

PETE WISHART (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on his commitment to ensuring that we have parity and fairness in private parking—it is matched only by his dexterity on the drum kit and his ability to keep time in the parliamentary rock band, MP4.
This is a very fine Bill, and I will come to the code of practice on Third Reading, because it is really important that we get a better understanding of the Government’s intentions on the code of practice, which is a most important feature.

I support the right hon. Gentleman on new clause 1 and the subsequent amendment. It is very important to ensure that we get clarity on the appeals process. He is right that we are not covered by POPLA in Scotland. If a car parking operator is part of the independent parking community, we can appeal to the Independent Appeals Service, but that leaves a rather big gap in the opportunities in Scotland to appeal against some of these parking restrictions.

The right hon. Gentleman will know my interest in all this. The city of Perth is totally plagued by private parking companies, making life a misery for my constituents and the many people who come to visit that beautiful city. It is important that we get the Bill done and address this issue. On appeals, a member of staff who works in my office in Perth spends a good part of his day having to deal with complaints and assist people with appeals about the operation of parking companies in my constituency. Something has to be done. The procedure is that someone can appeal against private parking operators, but they are self-regulating. It is up to them whether they take it seriously and to make a ruling and a judgment if they think it is fair—if they think the appeal should be progressed—and then to make a response to the complainant. Clearly, that course of action is unsatisfactory.

This comes down to the British Parking Association’s set of regulations. It introduced POPLA in England and Wales several years ago, which, as I have said, does not cover Scotland. People can appeal to POPLA only if they have failed to secure a successful outcome in appealing to the private parking operator in the first place, and there is a £20 charge. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman made it clear that the new independent appeals process that he outlines in the new clause will be free of charge. That is important, because I have seen some of these fines range to over £100—I think the top one I have seen, at the end of one of the very many threatening letters that are used by debt collection companies, was in the region of £140 to £160. The added cost of the appeal is another burden and feature that has to be endured by the hard-pressed motorist.

12.30 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I think 50% of MP4—[Interruption]—sorry, 75% of them are in the Chamber. Perhaps they will give a rendition before the end of the debate. Can I check, whatever we agree, that the measure will apply in Scotland, and the Scottish Parliament will back it?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely; it is important that that happens. At the beginning of his speech, the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire mentioned that a legislative consent motion has been passed in the Scottish Parliament to ensure that this Bill covers Scotland and that those aspects that require this House to legislate on behalf of the Scottish Parliament are secure. Every part of the Bill applies to Scotland, so it will be national, which is important for many of the fine English visitors who come to my constituency and enjoy the delights of Perthshire. They will be protected if they park in my constituency, and will have the same rights of appeal and process as everyone else.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has set out very clearly the concerns in his constituency. He has been an MP slightly longer than I have, but is he shocked by the sheer amount of correspondence in his inbox and postbag on parking charges? The Bill gives us a chance, particularly in Scotland, where the appeals process is slightly more iffy, to achieve clarity and fairness for our constituents against many of those—as he rightly says—rogue independent parking operators.

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. It is not just my city of Perth—I understand that there are issues across Scotland, where we have particular difficulties. I will come on to rogue operators on Third Reading, as it is important that they are identified and sharp practice is outlined to the House. What has happened is clearly a problem, and the hon. Gentleman is right that we require these measures. That is why I am proud to sponsor the Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire, and it is really important that we get it through the House today. I am pleased that we are here to ensure that a thoroughly good Bill gets through the House.

Michael Tomlinson: As ever, the hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent and passionate defence of the Bill, which is excellent. A few moments ago, he mentioned the threatening letters that were sent. Does he agree that, like my constituents, his more robust constituents can shrug them off, but the more vulnerable are caught up, and for them the charges, when set out in detail, are more worrying and impactful if they end up having to pay them?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. I have seen examples of correspondence from debt collection agencies, and the increasingly aggressive and intimidating tone that is taken in subsequent letters. It gets to a stage where some of my constituents and visitors to my constituency feel that they may be taken out and shot at dawn because they tried to park a car in a parking space. I wish to return to this, because the Minister will probably have hopeful things to say about debt collection. I understand that that is one of the areas he is looking at, and I hope to secure good news from him on Third Reading about how that will be incorporated in the code of practice so that we can end the more intimidating features of debt collection agencies.

I do not want to say anything else other than to totally support the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire in what he is trying to achieve in his amendments. May I tell the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who is engaged in a conversation with his Whip, that I do not think that I can support him? That is a shame, because we have both served on the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs. He was a doughty and—I shall use the term—challenging Member to the Chair, as I was at that point. I very much enjoyed his contribution, as he scrutinises things personally and ensures that he tries to test things to the absolute limit, but I do not think that I can support him, given all the concerns about procurement raised by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire. I understand that that is not decided
yet, and there might be a need for such measures, but I cannot support anything that might get in the way of the Bill taking effect.

Reflecting the comments made by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire, the Minister has been nothing other than totally efficient and effective in dealing with the Bill. He has responded generously, which is an example to other Departments and Ministers when we try to get such legislation through the House. If he is prepared to say that this is happening within the timescale allocated in the Bill, I would be more than happy and satisfied, having worked with him and seen the way in which he approaches these issues. I encourage the hon. Member for Christchurch not to press his amendments, as they would not have the support of practically anyone in the House, but I am more than happy to support the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I want to speak, very briefly, about new clause 1 and amendment 6. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on the progress that his Bill has made, and particularly congratulate him on the new clause and amendment, which clarify the possibilities for a truly independent appeals procedure.

Landowners clearly have a right to decide on reasonable and fair terms for the way in which their land is used, but, as we know from our constituency postbags and email inboxes, in too many cases those terms do not seem fair. The processes for contesting unfairly issued parking tickets are expensive and drawn out, and motorists who are willing to contest a ticket through the courts take a disproportionate risk in the form of a dramatic escalation from the original fine as well as, of course, the legal costs. While we would not wish to prejudge the outcome of the parking code, one possibility that should be considered is the handling of appeals by a single independent person, and the measures allowing that person to be appointed and the funds to come from fees collected from the private operators covered by the scheme are therefore sensible.

Sir Greg Knight: Will my hon. Friend also give himself credit? It was partly as a result of the representations that he and others made that I decided to table the new clause and amendments.

Mike Wood: I thank my right hon. Friend for that generous intervention, but I fear that it may be a little too generous. The work that he and his team, and Ministers, have done has been key to the Bill.

I will certainly support both my right hon. Friend’s amendments and the Bill’s Third Reading, but I am afraid that I do not find myself able to support amendment 8, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). I think that we have a responsibility to ensure as far as possible that the provisions in our legislation are enforceable, and I therefore question the wisdom of legislative provisions requiring best endeavours on the part of the Government, although I have no doubt whatsoever that Ministers will at all times exercise such best endeavours. I am particularly reassured by the undertakings given by my right hon. Friend to harry Ministers if that becomes necessary, and I am in absolutely no doubt that he is perfectly capable of making Ministers’ lives a misery, just as he has promised.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in support of this important Bill, and I commend the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) for his hard work in championing it and enabling it to reach this stage. I also congratulate all the Members who have worked on it with him.

The Bill will, I hope, lead to long overdue change in the car parking industry. It is alarming to hear from Citizens Advice that parking companies are issuing 13 times more tickets than were issued a decade ago. This is a business model that is designed to exploit motorists rather than fulfilling its purpose. It is a case of several cowboy parking companies treating motorists in the most unfair terms, and it cannot be allowed to continue. Throughout our debates we have heard of a range of problems that motorists have faced, from poor signage and broken machines to appeal systems that lack transparency and fail to apply any common sense. Today we have the opportunity to ensure fairness for British motorists.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I support the Bill. Does my hon. Friend agree that some of these car parks are set up to trap motorists and lure them in? Their real aim is to get motorists not to pay the parking fee, but to pay the fine.

Faisal Rashid: I totally agree. It can be difficult for the general public to understand these machines; they are set up to be confusing and then people get trapped. We are passing a Bill that will oblige the Government to introduce a new statutory code of practice to spell out what behaviours can be reasonably expected from private car parking operators.

As the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire, who is in charge of this Bill, highlighted on Second Reading, there are almost 19 million journeys a day that end at a parking space. This is truly a Bill that will affect almost every person in this country in some way; it is an issue that hugely affects my constituents in Warrington South, as it affects the constituents of many other Members here. I have been contacted by a number of people who have told me of issues they have faced with parking companies. In most of these cases, my constituents are being penalised for breaking an obscure term of the car park, or they are being falsely accused of not purchasing a parking ticket.

One constituent told me that she had purchased a ticket but made a genuine mistake and failed to enter her vehicle registration number correctly. As a result, my constituent was sent a number of letters threatening court action if she did not pay a substantial fine. Despite the innocence of her mistake, the letters scared my constituent into offering up the money.

Such threatening and exploitative behaviour is totally unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue, and this is far from a one-off incident. I have been contacted by several constituents who made similar mistakes, often entering a single digit or character of their vehicle registration incorrectly, and have then been faced with
fines and threatening letters. That is wholly unacceptable, especially as these mistakes are often made because of parking companies’ deliberately misleading signage and complicated machines.

**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on introducing this timely Bill.

The hon. Gentleman is talking about parking companies that almost set motorists up to fail to be able to meet their terms, but it is not just the small operators who do this. It is alleged that NCP—National Car Parks—in the centre of Crawley has been charging motorists for illegal parking when it does not even have planning permission for the CCTV to monitor those cars. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the large companies must also comply with best practice?

**Faisal Rashid:** I totally agree: all operators, whether large, medium-sized or small, should be part of this code of practice.

Some of my constituents are being targeted with letters demanding money and threatening court action. Indeed, some people have contacted me to tell me that the situation has become so bad that motorists are being discouraged from visiting some of the town centres for fear of being targeted by rogue parking companies. This is a deeply sorry state of affairs; it is bad for my constituents and bad for our local economy, especially in the run-up to the festive season. High streets and town centres are already struggling. Rather than coming into town to spend money on the high street, people are choosing to stay at home and shop online.

The regulation of private parking companies that this Bill proposes is long overdue, and I am pleased that it has secured cross-party support. If this Bill is passed today, it will be welcomed not only across this House, but across the country. It is good to see that in a time of much division in this place there are still opportunities for colleagues to put aside their differences and work together to improve the lives of their constituents.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What a pleasure it is to follow the hon. Gentleman. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) and his excellent contribution. I could not agree more with the points that he has made, and I entirely endorse this Bill. I just want to make a few additional remarks. The overarching point—it has been indicated before but it bears emphasis—is that so many of these companies are a law unto themselves, and it is important to iterate the distress and concern that their actions can cause. When someone is faced with what looks like an official letter demanding considerable sums of money, they can become enormously distressed by that. The concern is that these individuals are making these demands on an entirely specious basis, and I want to give the House two examples—

**Pete Wishart:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is about to come to the amendments. We are now discussing the amendments that have been tabled by the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) and the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), and we are all desperate to make our Third Reading speeches, which will deal with some of the finer features of the Bill. I want to know what the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) thinks about the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire’s fine amendment about the appeals process.

**Alex Chalk:** I shall be getting to that point, but it is important to set the context as well.

My first example affects one of my own constituents. I was making a point about the distress that can be caused by these demands, many of which are being issued on a specious basis. I had a constituent in Cheltenham, in a road near Montpellier Terrace, who received a letter demanding that a fine be paid. However, it turned out that the company demanding the money was seeking to claim a parking ticket in respect of land that belonged to the person receiving the ticket. That was an extraordinary situation. In other words, the company had not bothered to check with the Land Registry to find out who owned the land. When I looked into it, it turned out that the parking company had been called in because of a vexatious neighbour dispute. The neighbour had called in the parking company to try to get at his own neighbour. This is a prime example of why we need a sensible system of regulation, to ensure that the system is not misused in that way.

The second example that I want to give, before turning expeditiously to the amendments that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has mentioned, relates to my own situation. Seven years after the event, a parking company wrote to me to suggest that my car, which had long since been sold on, had been wrongly parked. I knew that this area of law was covered by contract law, and that this was way out of time in any event, even if the underlying suggestion was correct. The truth is, I could not remember, because it had happened seven years previously. However, such an episode would be upsetting for people who did not have that knowledge and who would not realise that such a demand was time-barred.

I shall now turn to the new clause and the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), whom I congratulate on bringing forward this brilliant Bill. He is right to have a single point of appeal; that is enormously sensible. There is not a great deal that I want to add to that, other than to say that I hope that the clause will be flexible enough to ensure that there are sufficient resources to deal with these points. The reason I say that is that new clause 1(1) states:

“This section applies if the parking code contains guidance recommending that all parking appeals are dealt with by a single person who is independent of persons providing private parking facilities.”

All I can say is that I hope there will be more than one person, because there are likely to be a great number of appeals. I hope that it will be appropriate for the singular to include the plural. I am sure that that point will be dealt with, but there needs to be more than one person.

I also want to deal with the proposal from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch about the use by the Secretary of State of “his best endeavour”. I understand the logic behind his proposal, but I respectfully suggest that it is unnecessary in this case. The point has been made that there is a danger of seeing ghosts where none exists, so to speak. The wider point, however, is that,
were this provision to be required, it would surely be required in every piece of legislation that this House passes. That would transfer power from this House, where hon. Members can properly hold the Executive to account for allegedly dilatory behaviour, to outside the House because, as my hon. Friend rightly acknowledges, the issue would become justiciable. We could then have a situation where a person could serve a writ suggesting that the Government had not used best endeavours to bring legislation into effect, which would cost a huge amount of time, expense and inconvenience. More importantly, this House would effectively be precluded from discussing it, because it would then be a matter under discussion by the High Court, which would be an unsatisfactory state of affairs.

Michael Tomlinson: As ever, my hon. Friend is using his forensic intellect to consider these matters, but is not the situation worse than that? Even if it were justiciable, the phrase “best endeavour” is simply too vague. It would be impossible to decide, as the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) pointed out in an earlier exchange, whether a Minister had or had not used best endeavour.

Alex Chalk: Absolutely right. The Court would not thank this House at all for requiring it to make that kind of assessment. One could imagine how the evidence would have to be provided on both sides. The Minister would provide timelines, and then the Court might have to consider what the Opposition had to say. How on earth would the Court be meant to make a judgment?

Kevin Brennan: Does the hon. Gentleman suspect, as I do, that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has tabled his amendments to make a point about Brexit, rather than about this Bill? We would therefore forgive him if, at this stage, he chose not to press his amendments, having made that point so well in his contribution today.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman recognises that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is a Member of great distinction and resourcefulness. It may just be possible that that is his intention. If it is his intention, he has certainly made the point with his customary eloquence and effectiveness. Yes, I think this would be an excellent moment for him to recognise that the point is made, and he could therefore graciously not press his amendments.

Sir Christopher Chope: My amendment 8, which seeks to incorporate the phrase “best endeavour”, is completely nugatory in terms of legality or enforceability. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) that “best endeavour” is a meaningless phrase. I therefore will not press the amendment. We would not want to litter our statute book with meaningless phrases, whether it be in the withdrawal Act or in this Bill.

Alex Chalk: That was elegantly done. Well, on that basis, I do not have much more to say. I have made the points I wanted to make.

With the Bill being improved in the way that has been proposed, I end by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire. This is past time, and the Bill will be welcomed in my constituency, by the constituent I mentioned, by me and, I am sure, by Members on both sides of the House.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is wonderful when both sides of the House come together to support and put in place legislation that will make a practical difference to the day-to-day lives of the millions of people we represent. In that vein, I wholeheartedly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on highlighting this issue, and on the tenacity and diligence with which he has brought the issue to the Floor of the House and to Committee. I pay tribute to him, and many people will be grateful for his efforts.

I will speak briefly now, and perhaps respond to hon. Members’ comments more generally on Third Reading. For now, I will limit my remarks to the various new clauses and amendments.

New clause 1 will appoint a single appeals service to create further clarity for consumers, giving a well-signposted route to appeal a private parking ticket. I am delighted on behalf of the Government to support the new clause. It and the associated amendments will ensure that there is a fair, transparent and consistent appeals service for motorists. This has been warmly welcomed by consumer groups and the parking industry alike.

I am pleased to tell the House that Steve Gooding, the director of the RAC Foundation, has said: “we particularly welcome the proposal for a single, independent appeals service, which, together with a single, clear code of practice should establish a better, clearer framework and a level playing field that is fairer for all”.

The foundation has challenged the effectiveness of self-regulation in the parking industry. Only this week, it drew attention to the fact that in the second quarter of the financial year, private parking companies sought yet another record number of vehicle keeper details from the DVLA with which to pursue ordinary drivers and motorists.

The chief executive of one of the industry’s leading trade associations, the British Parking Association, has said that the association welcomes the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire, commenting that they “chime with our call for a single standard body, single code of practice and a single independent appeals service. This framework provides a unique opportunity to deliver greater consistency and consumer confidence”.

The BPA looks forward to pushing “for a positive outcome for all.” It is therefore with pleasure that the Government can support new clause 1.

I am also pleased to support, on behalf of the Government, amendments 1 to 6, which are pragmatic alterations that will support the Bill’s delivery through secondary legislation. They will give the Secretary of State the ability to delegate functions to non-public bodies, such as experts in auditing, as seems eminently sensible. They will clarify the role of the Secretary of State, in that he or she will have final approval of the
code of practice and any subsequent alterations that will be submitted to Parliament. Finally, as my right hon. Friend stated, the amendments will expand the existing levy under the Bill to cover the cost of appointing and maintaining a single appeals service. The Government support all the amendments.

Let me turn briefly to the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). I welcome his broad support for the Bill’s measures, and share his commitment to, and enthusiasm for, ensuring that the measures start making a practical difference to people as soon as possible. However, following the arguments that have already been made by various Members on both sides of the House, I, too, do not believe that the amendments are necessary. I can personally assure my hon. Friend that the Government and I are committed to creating and publishing a code of practice for the private parking industry as soon as is practically possible. I can confirm that considerable work has already gone into this, and I will happily walk the House through that in a second.

More generally, placing an arbitrary timeline on the process of developing a code and implementing the Bill would compromise our ability to make sure that the Bill comes into force in the way that we want it to, and with the impact that we all desire it to have. For example, a consultation with the public is necessary. Given the scale and volume of the correspondence to our postbags and email inboxes, which are already full regarding this topic, one can imagine that that consultation will be of extreme importance to many people whom we represent. They will want time to have their say, and we should make sure that that is possible. Furthermore, as has already been outlined, procurement practices might be required, and if they should be required, they will be subject to statutory timelines that need to be obeyed. Lastly, if the code of practice was going to put in place new provisions around such things as standard signage, standard forms of parking tickets or standard language, it would be appropriate for a suitable transition period to be put in place to allow companies to adjust to the new, fairer measures.

Sir Christopher Chope: Taking all that the Minister is saying into account, what is his best estimate as to when these measures will actually be effective in law?

Rishi Sunak: I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise answer to that question, simply because, in the first instance, I am not in control of the parliamentary process in the other place, as he will be aware.

However, what I can do for my hon. Friend and the House is to give some evidence as to the pace and commitment with which I and my team are working on this issue. My predecessor, my hon. Friend for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), had already, even before the Bill’s Second Reading, asked the director of the RAC Foundation to form a working group to start developing an outline code of practice. That working group contains members of the working group. At my instigation, my officials have hosted a parking operator roundtable in the Department to fully engage the industry to help to develop the code of practice.

All that work has not been in vain. It has informed a draft code of practice, which has already been published and shared with the Public Bill Committee, and I would be delighted to place a copy of it in the Library for hon. Members to see. I hope that, collectively, this will give all hon. Members the reassurance they need that the Government and I are firmly committed to developing this code of practice, and ensuring that the legislation is enacted as quickly and practically as is possible.

1 pm
I thank all Members who have contributed today, in Committee and on Second Reading. That has helped to inform the draft code of practice. Every conversation I have had about this issue, every piece of correspondence and any example that I have heard about has fed into how we will develop the code. We can discuss this on Third Reading, but I am pleased to say that almost all the examples I have heard about today will be dealt with in the code of practice, whether we are talking about poor signage, grace periods, threatening letters purporting to be from solicitors, or indeed the relationship with debt collectors and bailiffs. The new code of practice can solve those practical problems.

I pay tribute again to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire for all his work. I thank hon. Members on both sides of the House. I am delighted the Government can support the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch will not wish to press his amendments to a Division, in view of the reassurances I have given.

Sir Greg Knight: May I just echo the Minister’s final comment? I, too, hope that my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), having heard the pledges of support for the Bill and the clear expressions of good will, particularly from Front Benchers, will not press his amendments to a vote.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am not going to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. It is very good to have clarity for the Chair.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 1 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 6

Delegation of functions

Amendments made: 1, page 3, line 14, leave out from “may” to “functions” in line 20 and insert “—

(a) enter into an agreement with a public authority authorising the authority to perform any functions of the Secretary of State under sections 1 to 4 (other than the function of laying a code or alteration before Parliament);

(b) enter into an agreement with a person authorising that person to perform any”.

This amendment enables the Secretary of State to delegate functions relating to the investigation of breaches of the parking code to bodies that are not public authorities.
Amendment 2, page 3, line 28, leave out “public authority which is” and insert “person”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 3, page 3, line 34, leave out “the final version of”.
See the explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 4, page 3, line 35, at end insert “for approval”.
See the explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 36, leave out “The” and insert

“Once the Secretary of State has approved the code or alteration, the” —(Sir Greg Knight.)

Amendments 3 to 5 make clear that, where the Secretary of State has delegated the function of preparing the parking code, the Secretary of State must approve the final version of the parking code (or any alteration to it) before it is laid before Parliament.

Clause 7

LEVY FOR RECOVERY OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INVESTIGATION COSTS

Amendment made: 6, page 4, line 3, at end insert—

“(where the Secretary of State has entered into an agreement with a person under section (Appeals against parking charges) (appeals against parking charges), the establishment and maintenance by the person of a service for dealing with parking appeals (within the meaning of that section).)” —(Sir Greg Knight.)

The effect of this amendment is that, where the Secretary of State enters into an agreement with a person to deal with appeals against parking charges (see NC1), the costs of establishing and maintaining that parking appeals service may be defrayed out of the proceeds of the levy imposed on accredited parking associations.

Third Reading

Queen’s consent signified.

1.2 pm

Sir Greg Knight: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

We have had a good-natured and constructive debate throughout our proceedings, and I wish to thank everyone who has taken part. In particular, but not exclusively, I would thank the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), and his predecessor, who first indicated to me that the Government were willing to support this measure. I also wish to thank Sarah McLean and Phillip Dunkley, her predecessor, who managed the Bill in the Department and have been very helpful to me. There are many other people I wish to thank: Steve Gooding of the RAC Foundation; my parliamentary colleagues who served on the Committee; members of the advisory group, which I have also attended and played a part in, who have discussed these matters; and, last, but certainly not least, the official Opposition for their support for this measure, the Scottish National party and my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)—and he is my hon. Friend—who is a sponsor of the Bill. I am also grateful to the many people throughout the country who have contacted me with stories of how they have been unfairly treated by parking operators under the current voluntary regime.

As I have said, parking is an indispensable part of motoring, as if someone undertakes a journey in a vehicle, they will need to park it. According to the DVLA, there are 38 million vehicles on our roads, approximately 19 million of which will be driven each day and will then undertake at least one parking transaction. The number of penalty notices issued every year from private car parks continues rise, so it is essential that the Bill makes further progress. It is essential that those who park on private land are treated fairly and uniformly.

Motorists should have certainty that when they enter a car park, they are entering into a contract that is reasonable and transparent, and that involves a consistent process. That is not just my view: in 2015, some 78% of respondents to the Department’s discussion paper on private sector off-street parking stated that there were significant problems with how the sector conducts its business. Poor signage, unreasonable terms, exorbitant so-called fines, aggressive demands for payment and opaque appeals processes need properly to be outlawed.

Some private parking operators still deploy tactics that are clearly unacceptable. I have previously referred to an appalling case involving a pensioner called Angela, whose car was ticketed for £70 for exceeding the time permitted in the car park. Angela is 5 feet tall and although she had not initially noticed the parking sign, when she came back to her car she looked for it. It was mounted so high up on a pole that she could not read what it said. That is clearly unacceptable.

Another motorist, Mr O’Keefe, whose case I have also mentioned before, was driving on a private industrial estate, searching for a particular business that he was having difficulty finding. He stopped in an empty lay-by for around 15 seconds to reset his satellite navigation system and was filmed by a passing security van equipped with a video camera. One week later, he received a penalty invoice for £100 for stopping in breach of a sign that was situated not in the lay-by itself, but some distance further along the road. He realised that he had passed it at 30 mph. The parking company accepts that he was parked for only around 15 seconds, but when he used its appeals procedure, he still received threatening letters.

The hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) mentioned one of many cases in which usually pensioners, although not always—some of the cases that have come to my attention have involved pensioners—type one digit of their registration number into the machine incorrectly and the machine does not allow for any correction of the details already entered. The fee is nevertheless paid, but a ticket is issued. So, for many people, parking on private land can be a traumatic and expensive business.

One of the reasons why we need a mandatory code now is that technology is being used to provide evidence. The growing misuse of automatic number plate recognition cameras is a particular worry to me. Cameras ostensibly enable private parking companies to keep a record of exactly how long a motorist has remained in a car park, and provide photographic evidence if they exceed the time they have paid for. They say that the camera never lies, but things are not always as they seem.

In one car park at a fast food restaurant in Nottinghamshire that is policed by CCTV, drivers are told they must not enter the car park when the restaurant is closed. However, the signage telling them that is
located inside the car park itself, along with the details of the opening times of the restaurant, making it impossible for a motorist to know before they enter the car park whether they will receive a private parking notice.

At another private car park at a fast food outlet in Enfield, a driver was recently issued with a parking charge notice for overstaying. In this case, the motorist visited the restaurant twice in one day. The ANPR cameras recorded her leaving the car park on the first visit and returning for the second. By using the photos the wrong way around, the car park operators tried to charge her a penalty for a period when she was not even in the car park.

Henry Smith: My right hon. Friend is continuing to make a powerful argument. One of my constituents recently parked at a McDonald’s so that he could go in and complain that his drive-thru order was incorrect, and he received a penalty notice. It is not only the small rogue operators that abuse the system; some large companies are also sailing extremely close to the wind.

Sir Greg Knight: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. These examples are all, clearly, very distressing for the motorist concerned, as are the language and the threats that are often used—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). It is, however, important to remember that these companies have no legal power to fine motorists. That is something only the police, local councils and those enforcing railway byelaws can do. As a result, some private parking companies deliberately make their parking charges look very similar to official penalty charge notices. When the police or the local authority issue a fine, it will often be labelled as a “PCN”—a penalty charge notice—and may come in an official yellow cellophane wrapper. Some private companies are now using similar packaging and are even labelling their notices with the word, “PCN”, but this time it stands for parking charge notice. Often the term enforcement is used, but these companies do not have any enforcement powers.

Sir Christopher Chope: None of these companies would be able to operate in this way if they were not able to get access to the DVLA database. Why is nothing being done about that?

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that, when this Bill becomes law, as I hope it will, that is precisely what it will do: it will take away the right of a rogue company to seek vehicle keeper details, thereby putting it out of business.

Kevin Foster: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the whole purpose of this Bill—I will come on to this in my own speech in a minute—is to create a clear and single source for the code of practice and regulation so that the rogue operators cannot shop around, and also if those operators are not approved, they cannot approach the DVLA? What is at the absolute core of this Bill is stopping this flagrant abuse that is going on.

Sir Greg Knight: Indeed that is the case. In reality, these private parking notices are not fines, but invoices. It is the law of contract that governs the relationship between the parking company and the customer, as has previously been said. In other words, they are a demand for payment, because the car parking company says that a driver has breached their terms and conditions. They are private parking notices, and the code should require them to be described as such in future, and I am sure that the Minister will do that and that those companies will not be able to use threatening language or imitate or copy a ticket received from the police.

My Bill is designed to bring these bad practices and bad behaviour to an end. It requires the Government to create a mandatory code of practice across the parking sector to end inconsistent practices and unfair treatment of motorists. It will ensure that the terms on which private parking is provided, including the rights and obligations of each party, are fair, clear and unambiguous. The mandatory code will assure drivers that private car park operators will in future treat them in a reasonable and proportionate manner. If they do not, motorists will have access to a robust and independent appeal service. As I have said to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), erring car park operators will be put out of business by being denied access to the DVLA database. May I repeat again that I am most grateful to have the support not only of the Government, but of the Official Opposition and the Scottish National party? I say to the House that, today, we can take a big step towards making private parking a fairer and more predictable experience for us all. I commend my Bill to the House.

1.13 pm

Pete Wishart: Once again—this is now getting to become a feature—I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on progressing this Bill through the House with such dexterity, skill and consensus. I welcome the fact that, after today, this will soon become law. I also extend my congratulations to everyone involved, particularly to the Minister, who, as I mentioned in my earlier remarks, has been nothing other than consensual, effective and efficient in ensuring that this Bill has got through the House, and to everyone else who was on the Bill Committee with the right hon. Gentleman.

For me, this Bill cannot come soon enough. We need a firm code of practice that will constrain the worst excesses of these private parking companies. I do not know what Perth has done to deserve the attention of some of the more sharper practices of the parking operators, but for far too long we have been blighted by some of the worst excesses of these parking operators. They almost act, until this Bill, as a law unto themselves. I refer to them as parking cowboys, because that is exactly what they are. They harass and frustrate our constituents and drive tourists away from our town and city centres.

I am sick and tired of receiving emails from people complaining about the behaviour of parking companies, telling me that they will never again visit Perth city centre because of the negative experience they had when they had the misfortune to end up in a car park operated by one of these companies. I have received more complaints about one car park in the city of Perth than about any other issue. That car park is operated by the lone ranger of the parking cowboys: the hated and appalling Smart Parking—I see that many other Members are unfortunate enough to have Smart Parking operating
in their constituencies. It has reached the stage where one member of my staff now spends a good part of each day just helping my constituents and visitors to my constituency to navigate the appeals process.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con) rose—

Pete Wishart: I will of course give way to my constituency neighbour.

Luke Graham: I am indeed the hon. Gentleman’s neighbour, and I can confirm that I, too, receive many complaints about that same operator, from constituents in South Perthshire and from people in Clackmannanshire who visit Perth. I therefore want to say how much I support the Bill. Hopefully our staff will soon be able to focus more on the things that really matter to our constituents, rather than having to deal with car parking complaints, which really are the companies’ responsibility to fix.

Pete Wishart: I understand totally the frustration felt by the hon. Gentleman’s constituents who have to park in Perth city centre. I hope that we will both see the amount of correspondence we receive in our mailbags on this issue decrease significantly as a result of the Bill.

Another frustration is that Smart Parking is singularly unresponsive. It does not reply to representations from Members of Parliament or have meetings with us. It does not even start to engage with some of the difficulties we identify with its operation. I wish to commend The Courier newspaper in Perthshire for the campaign it has mounted about the situation. One of the reasons I am down here today as the Member of Parliament is the very fine work that The Courier has done on the situation right across Perthshire. I congratulate it on that.

The Bill means that these companies will no longer be able to get away with that type of behaviour. The days when they could distribute fines like confetti, and when they could confuse and frustrate our constituents with their so-called smart technology and poor signage in order to harvest fines, are coming to an end. The Bill is evidently necessary, because self-regulation has been a resolute failure. The toothless regulators, such as the British Parking Association, are singularly incapable of dealing with the sharper practices of the rogue operators.

The British Parking Association actually lists some of the operators as its members. I had a meeting with it this week, and it gave me a copy of its magazine, which includes a list of all its members, and who should be listed there, in bold letters? It was Smart Parking. The BPA does not have the ability to regulate these companies and has shown no sign whatsoever that it is trying to get on top of some of the sharper practices. The BPA gives a veneer of legitimacy to some of the more outlandish rogue operators by including them in their membership, allowing them to continue to operate. The Bill will oblige operators such as Smart Parking to amend their practices.

I want to mention another practice that I have observed in a retail park in my constituency—this is actually worse than Smart Parking. Two private parking companies operate one huge car park at St Catherine’s retail park in Perth. One company circled the car park with signs telling motorists that, if they had the temerity to leave the part of the retail park where they had used a parking space to access shops in other parts of it, they would be fined. It did that, and it actually took photographs of people leaving their car and going into other parts of the retail park where the facilities are covered by another parking operator. That is what it did, and this is the extent to which some of these private parking operators work. It is not good enough, and it has to end.

I want to say to the Minister that I think what he is doing is fantastic. I have seen some of the details he is going to put into the code of practice and I think they are fantastic. I congratulate him on taking the maximalist approach. I think the Government will approach this by ensuring they will do the utmost they can to protect the motorist from this type of practice. They will put in place a set of regulations that will ensure the best result we can get when it comes to these things.

Among the things I want to make a plea for including in the code of practice—given what I have heard from the Minister, I am pretty certain that he will be looking at them—are equipment and technology. We have to make sure that we get the signage absolutely right and that surface markings are clearly identified and regulated properly. There should be clear and accessible displays of the terms and conditions of the car park. We have already heard examples of when that does not actually work. I know that the Government are looking at consideration periods to allow motorists sufficient time to decide whether they would like to park, and grace periods to allow motorists time to pay and leave the car park. All of this would make a real difference to the parking arrangements in our cities and town.

I believe these parking companies intentionally deploy poor signage. The fact that motorists can be fined simply for entering a car park to look for a space is simply and clearly unacceptable. One of the car parking operators in my constituency actually fines people for entering a zero instead of the letter o. Apparently, the smart technology cannot cater for that, but the operator takes no recognition of that when people appeal on such a basis.

Another of my pleas to be included in the code—the Minister may be able to help us with this one—is capping fines, a feature that I think we all agree must happen. The fact that someone can be fined £140, £160 or £180 for parking a car is simply and utterly absurd. I think, and I hope, that this will be addressed. My suggestion is that fines or parking charge notices in private car parks should be no more than those of the local authority. I think it is fair that there is a uniform cost that people pay in any city or town across the country, and I am pretty certain that we will get to such a place.

I know the Government’s intention is to ensure that what are called PCNs will no longer be able to look like fines from the local authority, and that is really important. Will the Minister tell us how this will be done and how he intends to ensure that that happens? Parking companies have to get away from this confusion with local authority penalty charge notices, and they must do so without using the threatening and intimidating language on these tickets.

What I would like to see on such tickets is the full legal basis on which they can be distributed. As the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire said, this is a
contractual arrangement, so they are not fines. If the private parking company is to pursue such a case, it has to take it to the civil court to demonstrate clearly that the motorist has breached the terms and conditions of using the private car park. That should be mentioned on the parking ticket, as issued by the private operator. I think that would be fair.

**Sir Greg Knight:** I would argue that if the parking operator takes an erring motorist to a civil court, and it is shown in court that the form of private parking notice was not as laid down in the mandatory code of practice, that should be a case for dismissing the claim.

**Pete Wishart:** I totally and utterly agree. I will come back to access to the DVLA register later in my speech. The key to all this is the DVLA register and ensuring that access to it is predicated on good behaviour. If there are any examples of any of these companies going back to such sharp practices, they should be dealt with effectively and not given access to the DVLA register.

I am particularly delighted that the Government are looking at debt collection issues. I hope the Minister will confirm that the Government will state explicitly that operators cannot sell or assign debt to a third party, as that has to happen. The use of aggressive debt collection companies is probably the most grotesque, threatening and intimidating feature of parking companies’ behaviour, and the part of their operation that concerns me most. I cannot remember which hon. Member mentioned vulnerable customers who receive some of these letters, and what it must do if they receive a letter that tells them that the charge will impact on their credit rating. I think that is illegal—perhaps one of the greater legal minds here will clarify that for me—but that is the sort of thing that those letters include.

Debt collection companies increase the tempo and rate of intimidation and threat. One of my constituents received 10 letters from a range of different companies, with an increasing tone of belligerence and threat. It is right for private parking companies to expect settlement, and to deploy reasonable steps to recover it, but we cannot continue to allow threatening and aggressive letters that demand payment simply for parking a car.

Access to the DVLA is the prize that parking companies require to ensure they can continue to operate. The Government will introduce conditions for access to the DVLA database—perhaps the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire will confirm that—so that proper auditing must be conducted before an operator can join a parking association, and that compliance must be demonstrated. I believe it should be incumbent on parking operators to demonstrate fully that they are a responsible operator in order to get DVLA access, and if there are examples of bad practice, that access must be removed.

I am grateful that the entire Bill covers the whole UK and will be applicable in Scotland. We have agreed a legislative consent memorandum in the Scottish Parliament to ensure that the Bill will apply across Scotland, and it is right that we have uniform measures such as this. I travel down to London and park my car here, just as hon. Members come to beautiful Perthshire to enjoy the fantastic features of my constituency, and it is right for everyone to expect the same level of service and regulation throughout the United Kingdom.

We have seen what this issue does to towns and cities. Parking is an essential requirement for any town or city centre, and the right hon. Gentleman was right to highlight how many trips are made and how many parking experiences are involved as we go from A to B. It can have a devastating effect on local economies if we do not get the issue right, so parking is an important ingredient in our community and the local economy.

In my experience, people are happy to pay for parking—I have never seen anybody suggest that we should get parking for free, and any place where free parking has operated has become a disaster and a free-for-all. We need efficient and effective parking in our towns and cities. People are even happy to pay parking fines if they know they have been wrong and perhaps overstayed, or something happened and they received a fine. What they cannot stand, however, and why we receive so much correspondence and so many complaints in our inboxes, is when the fines are unfair and imposed disproportionately, or when people are pursued by parking companies. Ultimately, it is not beyond our wit to design an arrangement where someone parks a car, makes a payment, and is assured that that is the end of the matter. Needing to ensure a code of practice shows how bad things have become, which is why we must address this issue.

I hope that this is high noon for the parking cowboys. I hope they are brought under control and that I will not have continually to respond to constituents and visitors to my constituency about the behaviour of a certain company. This is a good Bill, and we must now see the code of practice. I know the Minister will ensure that we are involved in designing that code, and when he responds to the debate I look forward to hearing some of the features that will be included. Finally, I congratulate once again my good friend, the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire, on sponsoring this Bill, which I am sure will be successful today.

**Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on finally bringing this madness, quite frankly, to an end with this Bill.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have talked about their constituents’ experiences of receiving unfair parking enforcement notices. I declare an interest because I have experienced the exact same situation. I drove into an underground hotel car park, got my bag out and went into the hotel. A member of the hotel’s staff then told me how much the parking charge was—it was more expensive than the hotel room—but that there was a parking enforcement notice. I declare an interest because I had driven in and driven out of the hotel car park five minutes later. I won my appeal, but the hotel company said that it would discipline its member of staff for advising me to park elsewhere. Perhaps that is a private Member’s Bill for another day.

On the border of my constituency, there is a local authority car park. Bizarrely, part of the land is privately owned. People park there because they think they can
park for free, just as they can for the local authority part. There is no signage on the part that is privately owned and people do get charged. It is an absolute sting.

**Sir Greg Knight:** My hon. Friend is making a very good point. That is why it is essential that the code of practice has a transaction period that is free. In other words, it would give motorists thinking time between entering a car park and deciding whether or not to stay. In some parts of the country, car parks are situated in conservation areas where, for planning reasons, signage is inside. We need to give motorists time to go in and think, so they can say, “No, this is not for me” and leave without facing a penalty.

**Huw Merriman:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are talking about contract law. If people pick up an item in Boots priced £5 but at the till they are charged £10, many people think they can actually get the item for £5. In fact, under the offer and acceptance of contract law, the contract is formed only at the time of execution. Yet when one goes into a car park, one can be charged before executing the transaction. That has to be a breach of contract law.

On the charging mechanism, there is no proper definition for what is a reasonable and proportionate charge. That is of particular interest, because my former chambers sought a legal opinion from the Royal Automobile Club. The feeling was that the legal definition of reasonable and proportionate would be the cost of administering the charge. What was unusual was that the Supreme Court was asked to decide and found that £85 was reasonable and proportionate. The QC, however, felt that it was several times higher.

Perhaps the Minister could commit to guidance on what the charge should be. If that were to follow local authority charging, which outside London would be £60, I would perhaps stray into another area and say that I do not believe £60 is reasonable and proportionate. Local authorities will say that that is the cost because they do not make any profits, but I believe that they do. I believe that local authorities, time and again, use the money they raise from parking to pay for other areas of their spending. They are not supposed to do that. Barnet Borough Council, which was taken to court and lost, freely admitted that it was levying excessive charges to raise money for other services. No other local authority will ever admit that. There is a permitted amount they can spend from parking revenues on measures that enhance the environment. However, that is so wide and woolly that local authorities can effectively charge in any way they want.

**James Cartlidge:** Has my hon. Friend considered the position of rail companies? Under the Greater Anglia franchise, the rail company owns the car parks. The increase in its charges—I refer not to the fines, but to the franchise, the rail company owns the car parks. The position of rail companies? Under the Greater Anglia rail company, they were managing to land myself with—I have an unfortunate habit of doing that. In fact, I recently chaired an event with Gyles Brandreth at which a local authority won an award for its great parking policies, so I threw all my offenda in—not in the hope that they would be reimbursed. Season tickets are another issue for many. Someone buys a season ticket—so a company that has the machines knows that they have bought the season ticket—but if that person is unfortunate and the ticket falls down and is not on display when they close the car door, they will be charged because the ticket was not displayed, despite the fact that they have already purchased it. Again, there is the principle that someone cannot pay twice for the same transaction, but it is not being properly enforced. If my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire comes up with a private Member’s Bill again, there would still be much more to do. We are getting there on the private side of things, but I am afraid that our constituents do not necessarily see the differentiation. Many local authority practices are not working, too.

I will leave time for others to speak, but I could not stand up and talk about parking without mentioning my own parochial issues. There are only 12 local authorities left in the United Kingdom that still require the police to deal with parking matters on their high streets. I have two of those local authorities in my constituency. We have talked about police funding issues and that the police perhaps do not have the resources that they need to do everything, and rightly we have added another thing to their priorities this morning. The police in my constituency have turned around and said, “We are not going to carry on doing this.” Effectively, if someone oversta ys in a two-hour parking bay, it is a criminal offence and the police are required to take action. All the money raised goes straight to the Home Office, so there is no local incentive, and the police take the view that they should be doing other things, and I absolutely support them. The local authorities, however, do not want to take this on, so in my constituency there is a parking free-for-all on our high streets. It is so bad that I got Guide Dogs to come down and I walked around, first, blindfolded while being led, then with a cane, and then with a dog. It is absolute chaos for people; motorists are parking on dropped kerbs and on kerbs. Those are criminal offences, of course, but the police are not doing anything at all, not even in areas where local authorities have traffic wardens.

I mention this point even though I know that it will not be this Minister’s responsibility—it will be more for the Department for Transport. The Government have had very successful policies on our environmental causes—small measures that go down incredibly well with the public—but I feel that we are not doing the same with transport. People are absolutely sick and tired of the way that their high streets are being cluttered up. People are acting in an antisocial manner and getting away with it. In my constituency it has got so bad that I find myself taking photos and putting them on social media, which I probably should not do and is probably an offence of some type, but we have got to a point where we really need action.

The frustration for me as an MP is that when I make this point to local authorities, they do not necessarily want to take it on. When I make it to the police, they do not have the resources. I make the point about enforcement to the Department for Transport, but enforcement is not occurring either. It is not fair that
my constituents, just because of where they reside, are under a regime that is completely old hat and which most other authorities have moved on from, and are stuck in this situation.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire. I am sorry to have wandered off into the other spheres of parking, but we should not kid ourselves as a House that this is solved just with regard to the private side of things. On the public and high street side, there is more to do, and our constituents would thank us if we did so.

1.38 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on the progress of this much-needed Bill, which I am pleased to support on behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition. It is long overdue, as we have heard today, and I thank him personally for his tenacity on this issue. He will be the champion of drivers across the land, because we all know and can all tell very similar tales of constituents who have been clobbered by these sharp practices.

Today we have seen the Commons at its best. We often hear—and our constituents are the first to point this out—“Why can’t you ever agree on any measures? Why can’t you come together in the national interest over X, Y and Z and just come to a common-sense view and get it done?” Today, we have done precisely that, and I genuinely thank the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire, the Minister and the Scottish National party spokesperson, because this is the Commons at its best. We are getting things done for our constituents in every part of the United Kingdom.

There is a need for landowners and private car-park operators to have some control over those who park—no one would disagree with that—but enforcement must be fair, reasonable and proportionate. While many operators act properly—we should always remember that; we only hear about the nightmare cases, but there are operators who operate reasonably—the bad practices that we have discussed today colour people’s views of all parking operators, which is why the Bill is important, as it will provide uniformity in the code of practice and give people certainty about the rules across all private car parks. I have dealt with similar cases to those dealt with by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). I have a cross-borough constituency, and will give two examples, one from each borough.

First, there is a small private car park in Denton, the main town in my constituency. It is next to a building which is near the disabled parking bays. Two minuscule signs were erected at the entrance to the car park. When people drive in they do not see signs that are about the size of the Dispatch Box. Disabled constituents of mine parked, as they always have done, in the disabled bay, did their shopping and drove away, only to receive a parking charge notice a few days later. Again, it is wrong that there was not even a sign on the disabled parking bays, let alone a pay-and-display machine close to those bays. That probably contravenes the Equality Act 2010, along with several other laws.

That is wrong, and that is why I am grateful to the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire for introducing the Bill. I hope that it will be seen by the sector as an opportunity to rebuild the shattered trust between car-park operators and the motoring public. Poor signage and sometimes no signage at all, unreasonable rules, exorbitant so-called fines, aggressive and excessive demand for payment and an appeals process that does not work in the interests of consumers constitutes behaviour that needs to be stopped. Having listened to the Minister, for whom I have great respect, I hope that the Secretary of State will take action once he is empowered by the Bill to do so, and, given the assurances from the Minister on Report, I expect that he will.

Similarly, action must be taken to ensure that parking companies are not able to raise the level of fines to mitigate the effects of the levy that will facilitate the scheme. We need to crack down on the bogus procedure whereby they are able to make their fines look official. These are not penalty charge notices; they are nothing of the sort. To frighten vulnerable and elderly people, in particular, into paying unreasonable charges when they do not have to do so is wrong, and something that the Bill seeks to address.

As others have already said, we need to ensure that there is a cap on fines, and that they are appropriate. I strongly agree with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire that they should be at a level similar to the level of fines imposed by the local authority in whose area the car park is located.

It is absolutely right ultimately to deny access to DVLA records to companies that do not properly adhere to the code, and I thank the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire for making it clear to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) on Report that the Bill would provide for that. So many of my constituents cannot believe it is right for the DVLA to supply that information to cowboy operators, and it is most welcome that the loophole is to be closed.

As I have said, the right hon. Gentleman will be a hero among the long-suffering driving public. The Bill offers the prospect of a single set of standards that will help to end the confusion created by multiple codes of practice and appeals systems—and in many cases none—and will ultimately be fairer to all drivers. We wish it Godspeed in the other place, and look forward to its becoming law and saving so many drivers throughout the United Kingdom so much heartbreak.

1.47 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for that slight note of surprise.
It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). He is absolutely right: this is a fantastic opportunity for us all to agree on something. I am sometimes confused with the hon. Gentleman because our constituencies sound rather the same. We are, of course, on different sides of the House, but it is nice to be together on this occasion.

It is a pleasure to speak in the debate and to give my support to this welcome and timely Bill, which I am pleased to see continuing its passage through the House. I am also pleased that it has the support of the British Parking Association and the RAC Foundation. There is clearly consensus on the need for a parking code of practice for private parking providers in an industry that currently lacks regulatory rigour. Sadly, there are three separate codes of practice among the accredited trade associations, with the British Parking Association code stipulating one set of requirements and the International Parking Community another. That inconsistency is inappropriate, and I am delighted that the Bill seeks to address that comprehensively. That is why it has already sailed through Committee and Report, and why all the clauses were agreed to without Divisions. I am sure that that is testament to the amazingly hard work that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) has put into this extremely well-drafted Bill.

Like other Members across the House, I have received letters and complaints, although I am pleased to say they are not in the same league as the notorious car park in Perth, which I will bear in mind if I ever travel to Perth. My own such parking experience took place in Redditch a long time ago, before I was the MP. I went to Redditch and was caught out by a dodgy parking operator. Hopefully, my constituents in Redditch will be delighted that the Bill will be passed today.

The RAC Foundation expects 6 million tickets to be issued by private parking providers this year alone, up from 4.5 million in the previous year. That highlights the lack of a consistent code of conduct and the lack of clarity. It is also borne out by figures from Citizens Advice, which reports that, last year, it was approached by over 10,000 people to ask for advice on private parking tickets. That is a huge number of people, considering the demand on its services.

I support the Bill and look forward to it progressing swiftly in the other place.

1.50 pm

Kevin Brennan: May I join the long list of Members who have been praising the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) for introducing this Bill? He has had so much praise today that perhaps next Tuesday at the political studies awards, playing in MP4 and launching Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will be there well supported because I and the hon. Member for an award of his own for introducing this Bill. He will be deserving credit for that. He does deserve some sort of award for bringing the Bill through. I am sure that will make the right hon. Gentleman extremely popular not only, as he already is, with his own constituents—I can say that as he has a very safe Tory seat—but with motorists and constituents across the country.

I am glad that the Bill was strengthened today through the new clause and the amendments that the right hon. Gentleman introduced, and I am sure that when it travels down the Corridor to the other place their Lordships will want to look at it very closely and perhaps consider strengthening it further in co-operation with the Government. But what is most important is that we get it on to the statute book as quickly as possible because it will make a genuine and positive difference.

In Committee, I mentioned some of the bad practices. I am not going to dilate at length—as Mr Speaker might say—on those issues this afternoon, but some companies, such as New Generation Parking, which I mentioned, do not even respond to correspondence from Members of Parliament on behalf of their constituents. In Committee, I expressed the view, which I know the Minister heard, that any code worth its salt would ensure that any company that failed to respond to a letter of concern from a Member of Parliament on behalf of their constituent would be in breach of that code. It should be a basic requirement on any decent company operating any kind of business that it should respond to a reasonable inquiry from a Member of Parliament within a reasonable time.

Sir Greg Knight: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that point. If a complaint is made about the receipt of a private parking notice, whether by the driver, the registered keeper or the registered keeper’s MP, it should in my view be responded to within 14 days.

Kevin Brennan: I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has put that firmly on the record. He also responded positively in Committee when I intervened on him on this matter. I am sure that the Minister has heard what he said, and I hope that those who are preparing the code will also have heard that viewpoint being expressed here.

Perhaps we need to ponder further on the practice that is now developing of parking companies using technology to enforce these parking notices. I am concerned not only that they are using camera technology but that,
in more and more cases, anyone who parks on private land—for example, the site of St David’s Hospital in my constituency, where there is no charge but we nevertheless have to register when we park—is required to enter their registration number into a machine in order to be deemed to have parked legally or appropriately there. How is the collection of that data being properly overseen? Who is responsible for ensuring that the personal data that is being collected in the form of our constituents’ registration numbers is being properly and legally processed? Further to that, the companies do not often provide a paper receipt from the machine, and people are expected to provide a mobile telephone number or sometimes an email address in order to get a receipt to prove that they have parked legally. Who is responsible for ensuring that the data being collected in that way is being properly processed?

This issue was brought to me by my constituent, Derek Donovan, who has campaigned heavily on issues relating to parking, and to private parking in particular. He has also pointed out that, even when we are not required to provide a registration number, the parking company can go to the DVLA and ask who the owner of a particular vehicle is. The way in which that information is handed out, and to whom, is not being properly co-ordinated by the DVLA—if indeed it is its responsibility to do that. Only a sample of cases is audited, so we cannot be sure that that data is in all cases being released to responsible people and used responsibly and legally. As a result, Derek Donovan has registered a complaint with the Information Commissioner’s Office, the outcome of which could prove pertinent to the passage of the Bill in another place if we hear from the ICO before the Bill goes through its other stages there.

I do not want to go on at length, because we want to ensure that the Bill completes its passage before we end our proceedings today. I reiterate my congratulations to the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire and I wish it well for its further passage at the other end of this building.

1.59 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). I am enthusiastic about rising in support of this Bill, not least because I was on the Public Bill Committee on 19 July but, unfortunately, as I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government I did not have the opportunity to speak. I now take the opportunity to put on record my support for the Bill.

I wish the Bill could come into force immediately and, because I know it cannot, I refer my constituents who have issues with privately operated car parks to an excellent article in the Express & Star authored by Peter Madeley in which he sets out the advice from Sarah Garner of DAS Law on how to challenge these charges. There is clearly a difference between a parking charge notice and a penalty charge notice, and it is essential that my constituents understand the difference and are protected from the duplicitous actions of some of these private parking companies, not least because, as the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) pointed out, these fines can be as much as £100. It is important that we, as a Government and as a Parliament, protect the public from such practices.

2 pm

Kevin Foster: I am conscious of time, so I will keep my remarks relatively brief. I am delighted to support my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) in securing the Bill’s Third Reading. About 18 months back, the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), who cannot be here today, and I secured a Westminster Hall debate on how the use of DVLA records and ANPR systems allows some of the sharpest cowboys in the parking world to put things out that frighten people and seek to get money from them. In many cases they use sharp practices such as, when a person enters their registration in the machine, the first button they press wakes up the machine, or the weird keyboard does not seem to be working that day, or, unlike local council car parks nearby that use such systems, they accept payment for registrations that are not in the car park, so a person who has actually paid can still get a fine afterwards.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the role of Premier Park in Exeter in supporting this legislation through its management of Marina car park in the middle of Torquay, which has produced a ton of complaints compared with the entirety of Torbay Council’s enforcement operation at 39 car parks and on-street car parking facilities.

This code of practice is overdue, and most of the industry will welcome it. Most of the industry want to manage and run car parks fairly. Most of the industry has nothing to worry about from the Bill, and actually actively supports it because they do not want to be undercut by rogue operators that rely on income generated from fines.

I am conscious of the time and that a few more colleagues would like to say some words in support of this welcome Bill, which I look forward to being enacted as quickly as possible.

2.2 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to support this Bill, a sound piece of legislation sponsored by a sound Member from a sound part of the country. We should get on and pass it without further delay.

This is a serious issue. Some 10,000 people have been in contact with Citizens Advice over the past year in relation to parking fines, which can be traumatic and stressful for people who suddenly receive bailiff notices, threatening letters and other mail. One of the great things about this Bill is its flexibility; it is not a clunky thing that will become outdated as practice changes in the parking industry. Instead, the Bill will allow us to be flexible over time.

My experience demonstrates the need for this legislation. I have had experiences where certain operators have given me unfair fines, perhaps because they have wrongly typed in my car registration, and I have had successful redress and the fines have been dropped. In other cases, where the operators were more like the cowboys mentioned by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), I have not been successful. The Bill will bring coherence to the system and ensure a fair deal for everyone throughout the country.

It is brilliant that the Bill is supported by the industry. Andrew Pester, the chief executive officer of the British Parking Association, agrees that a single code is important to ensure that unscrupulous providers do not undermine
the parking sector with bad practices. The Bill will allow future Ministers to be able to sort out the issues that other Members have raised, to avoid excessive fines, to avoid the failure to give notices, to avoid excessive legal charges in pursuing those things, to stop the sending of threatening letters to vulnerable people and, above all, to strike off cowboy operators by making it impossible for them to trade.

This is a superb Bill. It is exactly the sort of thing that this House should be doing, and it will be hugely welcomed by constituents. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who has done this country a service by bringing forward this excellent Bill.

2.5 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I, too, add my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) for all his work on this important Bill and for sticking up for the consumer, consumer rights and the small guy in the street.

Good-quality parking services are a vital element of all our communities. Before coming to this place, I had the enormous privilege of being the cabinet member responsible for parking services at Chichester District Council, where I saw that as a duty to work closely with businesses and the community at large to ensure that we provided good-quality and safe services. I am especially proud that during that time we upgraded all the car parks to include contactless payment and payment by mobile phones. Indeed, we won many awards for our safe car parks in Chichester.

Having proper, well-run parking services supports the wider economy, as it facilitates people to visit our city centres or quaint villages. This is especially true for rural areas where people mostly have to use a car to get to, say, Chichester. Most car park operators are honourable and seek to offer fair, convenient parking facilities, and to make life easier for people who are trying to visit the city, but it is clear that this ambition to provide a genuine service is not uniform, and there is therefore a clear need for this Bill.

One of my constituents recently came to me having been sent a fine for not purchasing a ticket in a private car park. Her car was registered as she entered the car park by CCTV cameras, and the computer system deemed her not to have paid. On appeal, she insisted that she had in fact paid and bought a ticket, but she was getting nowhere. It was her word against theirs, as is often the problem in these situations. A few weeks later, she returned to me triumphant because she had found her purchased ticket and was able to prove her innocence. However, most of us do not keep old parking tickets. Hearing stories like this, it is no surprise that we now see 13 times more fines issued than a decade ago.

I fully welcome this Bill as it will allow my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to implement best parking practice across the country and to have an appeals process, as well as improving the management and operational practice of our car parks.

It is also important to look to the future of parking. As well as issuing guidance for common standards and operation, I urge the Minister to consider the impact that technology is likely to have on this topic. Personalised parking using number plate recognition technology and differentiated pricing based on peak and off-peak periods are likely to become much more commonplace in future, but we should make sure that they are used to encourage good parking practices and to disincentivise bad ones.

I think it is safe to say that we all support this Bill. I look forward to seeing it in practice and putting an end to the sharp business practice that we have seen increasing in our car parks.

2.7 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am very pleased to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on bringing in this Bill, which is a good dose of common sense in this time of division. He has managed to unify the House. Perhaps we need more such Bills.

The Bill is common sense in so many ways. All of us, as MPs, receive way too many emails, letters and calls from our constituents raising concerns about parking. It makes absolutely no sense for us, in our offices paid for by the public purse, to effectively be the customer services complaints process for some of the more disreputable car park operators. This Bill will help to avoid all that. Citizens Advice and other bodies are involved in these disputes to far too great an extent, as well. A single code of practice consistently applied means that if we go into a car park at one end of a street, it will have the same standards as the others. I also appreciate the penalty in the form of not having access to DVLA information should there be non-compliance with the code of practice.

My constituents always expect me to support common-sense Bills, and I will do so today.

2.9 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Being a neighbour of and sharing a county with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), it is a pleasure to come here to support him and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on this Bill. This parking issue affects constituents from not only Perth and Kinross, but Clackmannanshire, on the other side of my constituency, who go into Stirling. They, too, have experienced extortionate fines for very small or misunderstood misdemeanours. Importantly, this Bill corrects a wrong that was identified by Citizens Advice Scotland in 2014 in its “It’s Not Fine” report, which set out how private practitioners need to clean up their act. This is now being addressed and it is great to see a national problem having a national solution in this Bill, with the support of Members from across the United Kingdom.

2.9 pm

Mike Wood: This Bill is important not only in protecting motorists; it is vital to the vitality of our town centres. People who are afraid of high, arbitrary parking penalties do not come into town centres and so do not support local traders, and our high streets miss out. Parking providers have privileged access to DVLA records in order to enforce these charges. That is a privilege, and where providers are abusing their position through excessive charges and making sure that those escalate as a way of
dissuading people from contesting the charges, despite there being insufficient signage, the provider should lose those privileges, even if they go out of business. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), in bringing forward this vital Bill, has earned the thanks of motorists from around the country. He deserves the thanks of the traders in our town centres who rely on this and he deserves the support of all of us in this House today.

2.11 pm

Rishi Sunak: It is a pleasure to conclude this outbreak of consensus and unity. The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) put it perfectly: of course private landowners and car park operators have the right to manage their land effectively, but that must be done in a fair, reasonable and proportionate manner. For the first time, as a result of this Bill, that is exactly what will happen. We have heard so many contributions from Members in all parts of this House about the sharp practices that our constituents have had to endure, and we will now be able to put an end to those nefarious ways of doing business.

So many specific examples have been given that it will be difficult to respond to all of them, but I wanted to touch on a few of the common themes that emerged in Members’ contributions. The issue of surface markings was raised by many Members and I can confirm that the code of practice should look at that, along with signage—the size, the things that should be included on signs and where they are located in car parks. Again, that is a common-sense measure.

Consideration and grace periods was another issue picked up on by many hon. Members. We heard examples of Members and their constituents being taken advantage of. Ensuring there are sensible periods to allow someone to come into a car park, decide whether they want to park and then leave again without charge, and to allow them when they return to be able to pay for their ticket, get to their car and leave are sensible measures that the code of practice will examine.

We heard a lot about the legal status of private penalty charge notices and the confusing nature of private companies using that legal language. I confirm, again, that the code of practice should and will look at that, as well as the language and information that should be included on those private parking notices, as we should perhaps call them. This could include the contact details for the parking operator, clear information about the appeals and the challenge process, timescales for payments and the details in relation to the breach of contract, so that no threatening or misleading language can be used in relation to the terms of the situation that the parker has found themselves in.

Fines were a topic raised by many Members. Of course it is sensible that there should be some element of fines, but those should be reasonable. I have heard and taken on board the suggestion from hon. Members about linking them in some way to local authority fine rates, which are already in existence. That idea definitely has merit and we will continue to explore it with the team. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) raised the issue of railway parking. As he knows from his time in the Department, railway parking is governed by separate rail byelaws. Obviously, our constituents are not aware of that, so we are working with the Department for Transport to see whether we can find consistency between the various different regulations.

I hope hon. Members will remain convinced of our commitment to bringing this legislation into force as soon as practicably possible. Of course we all join in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) on his diligent and valiant efforts in this regard. In conclusion, I hope hon. Members can join me in thanking my team. A small team has been working on this incredibly important issue for many months. They have done a fantastic job and I am sure that they will continue to make us proud as we bring this legislation to bear.

2.14 pm

Sir Greg Knight: With the leave of the House, I once again thank everyone who has taken part. In anticipation of his future help, I thank my noble Friend Lord Hunt of Wirral, who has agreed to take the Bill through the other place.

The message to cowboy parking operators from this Chamber is loud and clear: in future, you play by the rules or you are put out of business. Let us give the Bill our blessing and make parking a much fairer experience.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.
2.15 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill relates to electoral fraud and abuse, so I hope that it will receive the Government’s warm support. There is a lot of voter abuse of our electoral system, which undermines our democracy. The Government have undertaken various initiatives to try to build public confidence in the system. They have launched various inquiries, including Sir Eric Pickles’ inquiry, and engaged with the Electoral Commission.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Would the hon. Gentleman not say that the scandal of the number of people who are not on the register is bigger than the need for measures to keep people off it?

Sir Christopher Chope: The fact that some people do not register when they are entitled to do so is an issue, and everything is being done to try to encourage more people to register. That is the Government’s policy and I certainly support it. If the hon. Gentleman had wished to introduce a Bill to deal with another aspect of our electoral system, he could have done so, but this is a narrow Bill to prohibit people from being registered to vote in parliamentary elections in more than one constituency.

It seems to me that it would be a good idea to tidy up our system. Currently, large numbers of people are registered to vote in UK parliamentary elections in more than one constituency. It is, of course, against the law to vote more than once in a general election, but after the most recent general election, several people bragged that they had voted more than once because they had been able to vote in more than one constituency.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of any people being prosecuted for voting twice at the general election?

Sir Christopher Chope: No, I am not. Indeed, that was what prompted me to introduce the Bill. After the general election, I spoke, in my naivety, to the Electoral Commission to inquire what it was doing to ensure that people who were registered in more than one constituency did not vote more than once. It became apparent that the commission does not have a national register, and therefore is not able to say whether a Mr David Jones in one constituency is the same Mr David Jones who voted in another constituency. That is why I have introduced the Bill.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I have every sympathy for what my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour is trying to achieve, but would clause 1(2) place an onerous burden on local authorities in respect of the checks required? Alternatively, does my hon. Friend envisage a national register such as that which he has just mentioned being brought into force as part of the Bill’s implementation?

Sir Christopher Chope: I envisage a national register. Indeed, I think the Government’s policy is to introduce a national register. I would be the first person to accept that the Bill is probably not perfectly drafted, and that anybody who wanted to try to undermine it would be able to do so.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My hon. Friend says that he is not aware of anybody being charged. In fact, five people were charged—one was convicted and given a fine; two had no further action taken against them; and the cases against the other two are, I believe, still outstanding.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that information, but I am not sure whether those five cases were based on anything other than open admissions rather than detective work. We need a system that ensures that people do not vote in more than one constituency in a general election and therefore do not abuse the system by voting twice.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Would it not be better to put greater emphasis on the management of existing law, which makes it illegal to vote twice in parliamentary elections, rather than potentially removing the franchise from people who may be away from their home at the point at which an election is called?

Sir Christopher Chope: No, I do not. If people are away from their home, they are perfectly able to apply for a postal vote. Some people have more than one home. Why should those people be in a privileged position by being able to pick and choose the constituency in which they want to vote in a general election?

Luke Pollard rose—

Sir Christopher Chope: I will not give way again because I am trying to develop my argument. It is obvious that not everybody accepts the principle that we should have a legal system that is as tight as possible so that it is easy to enforce against those people who carry out abuse. There were five prosecutions after the previous general election, but we know that the practice of voting in more than one constituency is much more widespread than that, as is reflected in both the Pickles report and also the work of the Electoral Commission.

Why do we not do everything possible to maximise the confidence in our electoral system and follow the recommendations that I propose in this Bill, which would ensure that if somebody registered with an electoral registration officer, they would, at the same time, have to declare that they were not already registered somewhere else? It is a pretty straightforward thing to do. There is also provision, which is not often enforced, that people should indicate their previous registered address, or that if they do not have a previous registered address, they should give some evidence of identity and perhaps also of nationality.

The electoral register is the key to the integrity of our system but, at the moment, it is very vulnerable. Another area of vulnerability is that if people are registered in more than one place and, to take the point of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), somebody is away, it is easy for somebody else to impersonate that person, knowing full well that they will not get caught out, because there are no circumstances in which that person will turn up to vote.
One of the deterrents against people going along and voting as somebody else in a constituency is that the real person could turn up to vote and that would create a bit of a problem. If people know that large numbers of voting cards have been delivered, sometimes in bulk to halls of residence at universities, for example, those voting cards are very vulnerable to getting into the wrong hands and then being the subject of abuse. This enables people to vote when they should not be able to do so, because they will be voting for a second time.

I am disappointed by the tone that we are hearing from Opposition Members. They do not seem to be concerned about improving the integrity of our electoral system and doing everything we can to eliminate electoral fraud. Surely that should be the starting point for any debate to try to reinforce our democratic institutions, one of which is, of course, the ability of a person to vote in general elections if they are aged over 18, but only once.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I disagree fundamentally with the Bill, for two main reasons. First, it does not focus on enforcing existing laws. We must be cautious about creating more laws for the sake of it. The statute book already provides for people to be prosecuted for voting more than once in a general election, so the effort should be put into ensuring that there are sufficient resources to allow electoral registration offices in our local authorities, which are well known to be suffering as a result of Government cuts, and police forces, which are also suffering from cuts, to enforce the law as it stands.

Secondly, we must consider what the Bill would mean for particular voter groups, and I am thinking especially of students and members of the armed forces. Those who serve in our armed forces are frequently posted away from their homes and families, so their ability to register in both locations is vital to ensure that they do not miss out on their democratic right to choose who to vote. Instead of removing the flexibility that comes from having complex lives, often involving unpredictable travel patterns, we should be using this opportunity to talk about how we get more people on the electoral register, how we encourage our 16 and 17-year-olds to register at an early age— even though they are currently denied the right to vote—and how we can move to automatic voter registration, so that when someone registers for council tax, for instance, they are automatically passed on to register online.

This morning I registered to vote in my place in London, because I moved house a couple of months ago. When I filled in the online registration—I did it on my mobile from the Front Bench—I was asked, “Have you moved house recently?” There is progression in making registration easier. In fact, some of the points that the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) made in his speech dealt with how people currently register to vote online. Online electoral registration has been an improvement in the system. It has not yet reached what I think should be its final destination, which is more automatic registration so that everyone is registered, regardless of whether they can fill in the details, whether their national insurance number matches Department for Work and Pensions records, or whether they follow things up with a letter along the way, which are the complications that have come from the registration system.

I think that potentially denying people the right to vote based on this type of legislation would be bad for our armed forces and bad for our young people studying in higher education, and for that reason I cannot support the Bill.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). Like him, I cannot support the Bill, because I cannot support anything that makes it more difficult for individuals to be able to vote. If my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) does not mind my saying so, I think it is a little mean-spirited when it comes to students. I remember registering twice because I was never sure whether I was going to be in Durham or back home in Mr Speaker’s constituency of Buckingham.

Anything that adds bureaucracy and regulation, or that makes it harder to incentivise people to vote, is not, in my view, in the best spirit of democracy. I say that as a supporter of votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, albeit I do not think we should have automatic registration. Quite frankly, if people cannot take that step to then go and vote—
2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 15 March 2019.

Business without Debate

STUDENT LOANS (DEBT INTEREST) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

BORDER CONTROL BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2019.

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2019.

LOCAL AUDIT (PUBLIC ACCESS TO DOCUMENTS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

EMPLOYMENT AND WORKERS’ RIGHTS BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (27 April), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 January 2019.

UNPAID WORK EXPERIENCE (PROHIBITION) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

MODERN SLAVERY (VICTIM SUPPORT) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

TERMINAL ILLNESS (PROVISION OF PALLIATIVE CARE AND SUPPORT FOR CARERS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

ARMED FORCES (STATUTE OF LIMITATIONS) BILL

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

NATIONAL LIVING WAGE (EXTENSION TO YOUNG PEOPLE) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (6 July), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 January 2019.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE DRIVERS (PROTECTIONS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2019.

ACCESS TO WELFARE (TERMINAL ILLNESS DEFINITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

CIVIL AVIATION (ACCESSIBILITY) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 8 March 2019.
CERAMICS (COUNTRY OF ORIGIN MARKING) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

ONLINE FORUMS BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

ABORTION BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

HEALTH IMPACTS (PUBLIC SECTOR DUTY) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

PHYSICIAN ASSOCIATES (REGULATION) BILL  
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (26 October), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 January 2019.

LEASEHOLD REFORM BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

LICENSED OF TAXIS AND PRIVATE HIRE VEHICLES (SAFEGUARDING AND ROAD SAFETY) BILL  
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (2 February), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 January 2019.

FOOD INSECURITY BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE AND PAY (EXTENSION) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

AUTOMATIC ELECTORAL REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENFRANCHISEMENT) BILL  
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (11 May), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 January 2019.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EDUCATION) BILL  
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (3 November 2017), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 January 2019.

MARRIAGE (SAME SEX COUPLES) (NORTHERN IRELAND) (NO. 2) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

HOUSE OF LORDS (EXCLUSION OF HEREDITARY PEERS) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

PRIVATE LANDLORDS (REGISTRATION) BILL  
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

YOUTH (SERVICES AND PROVISIONS) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

VIOLENT CRIME (SENTENCES) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

PACKAGING (EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

ASSET FREEZING (COMPENSATION) BILL [LORDS]
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

LEGALISATION OF CANNABIS (MEDICINAL PURPOSES) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

LOCAL HEALTH SCRUTINY BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

PUBLIC SECTOR EXIT PAYMENTS (LIMITATION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (EXTENSION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

TYRES (BUSES AND COACHES) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE (CO-FUNDING AND CO-PAYMENT) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES (BORROWING AND INVESTMENT) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

PRINCIPAL LOCAL AUTHORITIES (GRUNDS FOR ABOLITION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

COASTAL PATH (DEFINITION) BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2019.

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

LOCAL ELECTRICITY BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

CREDITWORTHINESS ASSESSMENT BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

CHILDREN ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT) (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thus showing what an enormously wide range of subjects this House deals with on Fridays.
T cells to better spot and kill cancer cells. It could offer people with certain hard-to-treat blood cancers the chance for long-term survival, or even a cure.

I was pleased to question my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions about CAR-T therapy following the NHS England announcement. I continue the call I made that day for the Government to ensure that a focus on blood cancer awareness, diagnosis and prevention will continue into the future. With that in mind, will the Minister update the House on when people with blood cancer are likely to benefit from CAR-T treatment and on whether the health system is ready for this type of personalised medicine?

Additionally, NHS England changed its mind recently and allowed ibrutinib to be used for patients with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia after three years’ remission. The development of new drugs is ongoing. Bloodwise estimates that over one third of all indications for which drugs are funded on the cancer drugs fund are for blood cancer, which highlights not only the challenges we face, but the potential to help.

In January, the APPG launched its inaugural report, “The ‘Hidden’ Cancer—The need to improve blood cancer care.” Key to this is the word “hidden”. Blood cancer is known as the hidden cancer because although patients may indeed be receiving or waiting to start treatment, they may not be displaying any obvious or visible signs of ill health.

I am careful to try to refer to patients and their support networks, especially in this context, as the impact of diagnosis on a patient’s family must also be considered, especially when children are involved. This is particularly the case for patients on so-called watch and wait. That is typically an option only for people with few or no worrying symptoms, whose quality of life and prognosis will not be affected by delaying treatment, and it is recommended for those with blood cancers or related conditions that are stable or slow-growing. However, if someone has been told that they have cancer and, at the same time, they know that they will literally watch and wait to see when they are in a position to begin treatment, it is understandably disconcerting, to say the least. Patients on watch and wait told the APPG inquiry that specific emotional support was required to help them to come to terms with what was happening. Approximately 27,000 people with blood cancer are currently on watch and wait in the UK. To put this in context, that is 13% of those living with blood cancer.

Turning to mental health, anyone with experience of living with cancer or supporting a friend or family member who has done so will know of the dedication of NHS staff and health workers in seeking to do all that they can to provide support. However, it is vital that these staff are given the tools to ensure that patients are fully equipped mentally through the psychological support that they receive. Our APPG report recommended: “Patients should have access to the full range of emotional and psychological support services throughout their treatment, for themselves and their families.”

The Government have put mental health on a par with physical health. As such, I would be grateful for the Minister’s assurances that blood cancer patients will receive the psychological support that they need after diagnosis, during treatment and after it has been completed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) again on his Adjournment debate yesterday on psychological support after cancer treatment. By working together on a cross-party basis, it has become powerfully apparent to me that we can make a significant difference. Indeed, I have mentioned that only last week, the blood cancer APPG held its latest meeting on access to drugs and treatments for patients. We were fortunate to be joined by MPs, charity representatives and, of course, patients, one of whom said something that has remained in my mind. She said that patients “don’t know if they’re living or dying”. That highlights succinctly and powerfully the importance of this work and the importance of patients, politicians, cancer charities, the Department of Health and Social Care and the wider national health service in ensuring that patients are supported as well as treated.

One of the most striking passages of our APPG report referred to the long-term nature of blood cancer, and how it is different from solid tumour cancers. Respondents to our inquiry found that the term “living beyond” blood cancer was irrelevant. They will probably never live without blood cancer—it will remain part of their life—and very few of those patients have access to the recovery package. Indeed, one respondent even said that they did not know what the recovery package was, which is a point of concern. The recovery package assists patients after their cancer treatment has ended so that they can seek to return to their normal life.

I welcome the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) recently reiterated that “the recovery package is being commissioned and delivered in full or in part by many Clinical Commissioning Groups and providers across England”.

He continued: “NHS England’s aim is to accelerate the process to ensure full implementation by 2020 so the package will be available to all cancer patients across the country regardless of location.”

He also stated that NHS England was “building up a picture of current provision to help target future work to support rollout.”

I should be grateful for clarification from the Minister for Health on how support for blood cancer patients is included in this analysis.

Turning to data collection, the inclusion of blood cancer in a range of data collection initiatives will help policy makers to gain a greater understanding of the condition and how patients can be supported. For example, clinical commissioning groups and cancer alliances do not group blood cancer into a single disease area, unlike the national cancer patient experience survey, which means that blood cancer currently receives less attention and therefore fewer resources. The inclusion of blood cancer in the cancer dashboard, which only covers breast, colorectal, lung and prostate cancers, would be a step forward for patients.

Earlier this year, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester, said in a written answer: “A second iteration of the dashboard is being considered by the National Cancer Transformation Board with a wider ambition to include rarer cancers and cancers with a lower incidence, such as blood cancers, as the dashboard develops.”

May I ask when we may expect such a development to come into effect?
GP surgeries are a vital part of the NHS. Like all MPs, I receive correspondence from my constituents on the subject of access to GPs. Indeed, in the NHS plan, we need enhanced support for doctors and their capacity to see patients every day, both in Crawley and up and down the country. While the A&E in Crawley Hospital was closed under the previous Government, Crawley Hospital urgent care centre is now open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I urge the Minister to ensure that hospital services continue to come back to sites such as Crawley Hospital, while at the same time ensuring that the resources are in place to enable our constituents to access their GP, not on the other side of the town or county, but in their own local area.

GPs need more assistance to detect and flag up blood cancer. A GP will see, on average, eight cases of cancer per year, only one of which will be blood cancer. The number of GP visits needed before a cancer diagnosis is significantly higher for blood cancer patients than for people with other forms of cancer. Someone with cancer will of course want to be diagnosed the first time they see their GP with symptoms, but one in six blood cancer patients needed to visit their GP three, four, or even more times before diagnosis. Only one in 42 breast cancer patients required such regular visits to be diagnosed with their condition.

In the wider debate, the numbers and the statistics are important. Not far shy of a quarter of a million people are living with blood cancer in the UK, and one in 19 people will develop blood cancer at some point in their lives. In Crawley there were fewer incidents of blood cancer than either breast or prostate cancer, but there were more blood cancer deaths than from either of those other forms of cancer. The challenges are immense. Blood cancer is the UK’s fifth most common cancer, and the third biggest cancer killer. However, there are reasons to be positive. Over a period of almost four decades, from 1971-72 to 2010-11, 10-year survival rates for leukaemia, one of the most common groups of blood cancer, increased from 7% to 46%. Among children, the figure has trebled to 81%.

In all those figures are the individuals who live with blood cancer, who care for family members who are patients, or who are advocates on behalf of those affected by the condition. My constituent Bill Bedford was diagnosed with myeloma in September 2016. He has undergone a stem cell transplant operation and is now fortunately in remission. Bill is one of many patients who are seeking to give something back. He has undertaken a 310-mile cycle ride, from London to Paris, to raise funds for Myeloma UK. Seven-year-old Ebonie Musselwhite, also from Crawley, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia two years ago. About 650 people are diagnosed with ALL each year in this country, half of them children. Crawley Fire Station and Crawley Lawn Tennis Club are just two of the local organisations that have held fundraising events to help contribute to the cost of support for Ebonie. Angus Rowland, a young man living just outside Crawley, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia in 2010. Sadly, he died in May 2011, just 14 and a half years old. The Angus Rowland Forget-Me-Not Walk and Run took place in October, just outside Crawley, to raise funds for Bloodwise in Angus’s name.

I said at the APPG report launch that we could not just stand there and be pleased with what we had published in our first report. Rather, it must form the basis of a continued programme of work to effect lasting change. To people living with blood cancer right now, who may be on watch and wait, who may be undergoing treatment, or who may have only just been diagnosed, I say this: there are people in Parliament who are on your side, and we will stand up for you. We want to help, and we will keep the pressure on the Government and the NHS. To those who may have undergone treatment, who may be having treatment now, or who simply want to ensure greater support for blood cancer patients, my message is simple: contact your local MP and ask him or her to contact the Department for Health and Social Care, NHS England and local clinical commissioning groups. Let us continue to raise awareness, so that blood cancer is no longer the hidden cancer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am delighted to welcome back to the Dispatch Box the Minister, Mr Stephen Hammond.

2.59 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a great pleasure to be here.

Blood cancer is the third biggest cancer killer in the UK and nearly 250,000 people are living with it today. Although cancer is relatively rare in younger people, blood cancers are the most common cancer in under-30s, so this is an important debate, despite the fact that the Chamber is not packed.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) on securing the debate and thank him for his contribution as chair of the all-party parliamentary group. As he rightly said, this is cross-party, so I also congratulate the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), who I understand is the deputy chairman and had an Adjournment debate yesterday.

Cancer is a Government priority. Survival rates have improved since 2010. About 7,000 people are today alive who would not be if mortality rates had remained at those levels. This must continue. We are transforming cancer services across England and taking an “all cancer” approach to improvements. We want our cancer services to be the best in the world. We want all cancer patients to have access to the treatment and the care that will allow for the best possible chance of a successful clinical outcome.

This is really important. That is why the Prime Minister last month announced a package of measures that would see 75% of all cancers detected at an early stage by 2028. Currently, just half of all cases are detected at an early stage. The new 75% target applies to all cancers, not just the 10 currently in the public health outcomes framework early diagnosis metric. We are keen to work with charities representing sufferers of cancers not currently included in that metric, on how best to measure progress towards the 75% target.

We are reforming screening, and investing in technology and research to improve diagnosis and care. That will form part of the long-term plan for the NHS and forms part of how we will achieve our ambition of seeing 55,000 more people surviving cancer for five years in England after 2028.

In December 2016, the Government invested £200 million to encourage earlier diagnosis, improve the care for those living with cancer and ensure that cancer patients
get the right care for them. Early diagnosis of blood cancers can sometimes be difficult, as my hon. Friend said. Symptoms can be vague and often misdiagnosed, delaying treatment.

Mark Tami: That is a particular problem with children. Sometimes these things are dismissed as growing pains or bruising—just kids being kids.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. That is essentially why the Government put that money in—to ensure that earlier diagnosis could be enabled. He makes a valid point. It is clear that sometimes patients see GPs multiple times before getting that referral. The money put in to ensure that earlier diagnosis will hopefully ensure that that referral happens more quickly.

In addition to helpful earlier National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines, NHS England has been testing innovative ways of diagnosing cancer earlier, with sites piloting multidisciplinary diagnostic centres for patients with vague or non-specific symptoms, such as those common in blood cancers. In her announcement, the Prime Minister pledged to roll out these rapid diagnosis centres nationally to offer all patients a range of tests on the same day with rapid access to results.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley mentioned CAR-T cell therapy. He will know that earlier diagnosis must mean earlier treatment and there have been some exciting developments in that area for people under 25 with leukaemia. Last week, NICE recommended the pioneering cancer treatment CAR-T cell therapy for young people with relapsed or refractory B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukaemia.

My hon. Friend asked about what is happening and timescales. Through the Cancer Drugs Fund, Kymriah will now be offered to people under the age of 25 who have not responded to current treatment or who have relapsed from stem cell transplants. That marks a new generation of personalised medicine with the potential to transform cancer patient care worldwide. As he knows, the work is in its early stages. We know that more personalised treatments will be game changers in cancer treatment.

My hon. Friend also talked about people who have to live with and beyond cancer. More than 300,000 people are diagnosed every year. Innovations in treatment mean that more people look forward to a life after cancer and, as survival improves, we must ensure that patients enjoy as good a quality of life as possible after treatment. We are rolling out the recovery package to every cancer patient by 2020, including of course those with blood cancer. This is a set of interventions designed to help patients and clinicians to assess a patient’s physical and emotional needs at appropriate points on the journey of recovery. It goes from diagnosis at the beginning to recovery at the end. For blood cancer patients, the recovery plan will be personalised to take account of the unique characteristics of blood cancer, which can be very different from those caused by a solid tumour, as my hon. Friend, the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, rightly recognised.

My hon. Friend asked for some comments on psychological support, which was the basis of the Adjournment debate yesterday. Many patients with a chronic blood cancer diagnosis will sadly never be cured. They will be on a regime of watch and wait, often over many years, to see if the cancer has progressed to a point where treatment needs to take place. This takes a huge psychological toll on the patient and their family. The recovery package therefore takes a holistic approach and also considers mental health needs. When patients require additional psychological support, they must have access to appropriate mental health services. Mental health is a priority for the Government, and last year we announced an additional £1.3 billion to expand the NHS mental health workforce, which will allow an extra 1 million patients to be treated by 2020-21. That will help to ensure that cancer patients can be referred promptly to any psychological support they need as part of their recovery package.

My hon. Friend mentioned including blood cancer in the cancer dashboard. Public Health England is working with NHS England on the next phase of the dashboard development, and this will be informed by the needs of key stakeholders and cancer charities. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), has expressed his frustration that the dashboard is limited to the top four cancers and wants to see it expanded. NHS England and Public Health England have had clear direction from him on this, and he and the Department will be watching this with interest. I know that he will want to speak to my hon. Friend and to the all-party parliamentary group on that matter.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley will be reassured to hear that the Government are absolutely committed to transforming services for all cancer patients, including blood cancer patients. More people are being referred and diagnosed than ever before, and thanks to innovative treatments, more of them will survive their cancers. The cancer strategy and the progress that the Government have made in implementing its 96 recommendations provide the ideal launch pad for the long-term plan. With cancer as one of its key components over the next decade, it will enable the NHS to ensure that every cancer patient gets the emotional, psychological and physical support that they need to live well with, and beyond, cancer.

Question put and agreed to.

3.8 pm

House adjourned.
I am sure we are all aware, in recent times the issue has become a major global concern. The e-petition states: “In response to the problem of an ever-increasing amount of plastic waste polluting our environment, we need to make supermarkets offer an option of no packaging or eco-friendly packaging for each item of fresh fruit and vegetables they sell.”

There is no doubt that plastic pollution is one of the biggest global environmental challenges of our time. As I am sure we are all aware, in recent times the issue has attracted a great deal of public awareness and increased concern about the damage we are doing to our environment through the amount of plastic waste that we are creating.

It is little wonder that plastic has become so popular: it is lightweight, versatile, moisture-resistant, durable and cheap to produce. Those benefits mean that Britain is not alone in developing a strong appetite for plastic goods. Annual global plastic production has soared in the past 60 years. In 1950, the world’s population produced about 1.5 million tonnes of plastic; by 2016, global production of plastic had risen to 335 million tonnes, about 1.5 million tonnes of plastic; by 2016, global production of plastic had risen to 335 million tonnes, with 60 million tonnes produced in Europe alone. The rapid rise in production and subsequent disposal of plastics have brought devastating consequences to all aspects of the environment, particularly to our marine life.

The majority of single-use plastics, which include non-recyclable and non-biodegradable plastic packaging found in shops and supermarkets, are disposed of within minutes of being used. Every day approximately 8 million pieces of plastic pollution find their way into our oceans. Every piece of plastic can take decades or longer to degrade, and will simply break down into smaller and smaller particles. We then find plastic entering the ecosystem, where it has the potential to kill seabirds, fish and animals through ingestion, releasing harmful toxins as the plastic breaks up. Larger pieces of plastic can be a threat to the life of marine mammals and seabirds. It is estimated that there are now around 5 trillion macro and micro plastic pieces floating in our ocean, with a weight of over 250,000 tonnes.

Steve Double: That is indeed a huge challenge, which needs to be addressed from all angles. As the hon. Gentleman said, there are great challenges, particularly for developed countries, to reduce the amount of plastic that is produced and in circulation. We also need to ensure that we dispose responsibly of any plastic that is produced and ensure that it is not contributing to the environmental pollution that we have seen for far too long. That challenge has to be addressed from a number of different angles; I do not think there will ever be one simple solution.

The amount of plastic entering our seas is now a matter of huge concern for many people. As is well documented, it is estimated that by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in our oceans. That is of concern not only because of the damage it is doing to the marine environment, but because that pollution is being ingested by humans as we eat the fish from the sea. We should really take the issue seriously and seek to address it.

It is right to acknowledge the steps the Government have already taken in reducing the amount of plastic pollution. It is well documented that the 5p plastic bag charge, introduced by the previous Conservative-led Government, has dramatically reduced the amount of plastic bags in use: by 83%. About 9 billion fewer plastic bags have been used since the introduction of that simple 5p charge. The Government have brought forward a comprehensive 25-year plan for the environment, including measures to look at reducing plastic waste and disposing of waste more responsibly. That should be welcomed. I want to join the many environmental groups that are calling for an introduction of plastic-free aisles and products in our supermarkets.

John Howell: Does my hon. Friend think that we are spending enough money on research to develop the products that will still have plastic’s advantage of retaining water, but which are not plastic and are biodegradable?

Steve Double: I guess the only answer to that question is no. We could always spend more on research, to reduce the amount of damage we are doing to our environment. I know there are a number of innovations...
coming forward in other forms of packaging that can provide the benefits of plastic without the damage to the environment. We should do all we can—I encourage the Government to consider anything they can do—to support and invest in those measures, to ensure that we are seeking not just to cut back on plastic, but to come forward with other answers to packaging that provide the benefits of plastic, but do not damage our environment.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is making such a good speech and responding well to interventions, so I thank him. A great friend of mine, Barry Van Danzig, the CEO of the Wastepack Group Limited, believes that the only way we can get past this problem is to make waste valuable. As soon as that happens, somebody will collect it. Money—the cash that it is worth—is at the heart of what we are all trying to achieve.

Steve Double: The hon. Lady makes a good point. The amount of fresh-food plastic packaging that is created contributes hugely to the amount of plastic waste that we as a country produce. It is estimated that about 800,000 tonnes of plastic waste are produced by supermarkets selling food in plastic packaging to households.

I am sure that we all have a favourite fresh-food item that is packaged in unnecessary plastic. I will not steal the thunder of other hon. Members who will comment on theirs, but mine is the cauliflower. When I go to buy a cauliflower from my local supermarket, I am astounded that it is in a plastic wrapper that does not even completely wrap it, so it cannot be argued that it is keeping it fresh. I am pretty sure that it is there simply for the supermarket’s convenience, so it can put a barcode on the wrapper. There are many examples where plastic is used not to keep the product fresh but for the supermarket’s convenience in transport and display. In those cases, a lot more could be done to reduce the amount of plastic packaging.

Another important factor is the change in British shopping habits. A few years ago, most of us would go to the supermarket once or perhaps twice a week and buy enough for several days, but according to many reports, two thirds of UK shoppers now visit the supermarket at least once a day. Many people shop daily, on their way home from work, to buy food for their meal that evening. Buying food that will stay in the house for several days and has to be kept fresh is no longer necessarily the key driver that it used to be for British supermarket shoppers.

I am greatly encouraged by the awareness and understanding of this issue among our young people. I often visit the local schools in my constituency and I am always pleasantly surprised by young pupils’ understanding of the issue of plastic waste, and the need to be responsible and to reduce the amount of it. That came through in the work that the House of Commons outreach and engagement team carried out in the lead-up to the debate. The team sought to engage with the public, particularly young people, to seek their views, and of the 1,000 students from 19 different schools that it contacted, 76% agreed that supermarkets should offer plastic-free options for fresh produce, and about half said that reducing plastic packaging was one of the biggest ways that we could reduce the amount of plastic waste. I thank all the students and schools who engaged in that process and helped us to gather those views. We appreciate their input.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on food waste. I acknowledge that some packaging helps to preserve food’s shelf life, but in many cases it is unnecessary. It has been brought to my attention that in supermarkets it is often cheaper to buy the packaged-up produce, because it is on special offer, so buying a couple of avocados in a package might be cheaper than buying them loose. It seems ludicrous, but if people have to pay extra for loose produce, I understand why they feel inclined to buy the packaged produce, even if they are trying to avoid plastic waste. Do supermarkets not have a role to play in changing that?
Steve Double: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that complexity is part of the challenge. Supermarkets can help by ensuring that as much as possible of the plastic packaging they use is recyclable, and that if it is not, it is clearly labelled accordingly. That will help households and consumers to make informed decisions. Consumers are key to the process. The Government can perhaps do more to reduce plastic waste from food packaging, but ultimately consumers will drive change by making informed choices and by making the responsible choice—whenever they are given a choice—of the option with the least amount of packaging, and of plastic-free packaging if possible.

Many supermarkets have sought to take action. I believe that much of that has been driven by consumer choice and by consumers’ desire to reduce the amount of plastic packaging, and we should welcome that. In September, Lidl announced that it would cease to use black plastic packaging on fruit and vegetable products by the end of that month. As we know, recycling black plastic is challenging. Morrisons, the fourth-largest UK supermarket chain, announced in April that it will bring back traditional brown paper bags for its fruit and veg aisle as part of a range of measures to cut plastic waste. I am sure many of us read the reports over the weekend that a north London supermarket is the first independent supermarket in the country to introduce plastic-free aisles, and is now calling on others to follow its lead. There are signs that retailers are starting to get the message that consumers want less plastic waste from their food packaging. I encourage all consumers who feel strongly about this matter to continue to drive home that message.

I believe that there is a role for the Government, but most of the change will come from the consumer. The introduction of the 5p charge for plastic bags shows that the Government can nudge people to make the right choices. We can use a combination of carrot and stick to drive good behaviour from retailers, with the threat of taxation if steps are not taken, but there are other measures that could be used. One idea I would like to explore is a reduction in business rates if retailers commit to reduce the amount of plastic in their packaging. That is just one way of encouraging the right behaviour from retailers.

We in Parliament clearly have an important role to play in setting an example. We have started to do that by taking steps towards a plastic-free Parliament and reducing the amount of single-use plastic in this place. It is important that parliamentarians continue to set an example and take a lead for the rest of the country to follow.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Gentleman and I are both involved in the protect our waves all-party parliamentary group, which deals with ocean conservation, so he knows that Surfers Against Sewage did brilliant work in pushing for a plastic-free Parliament. The sauce sachets have disappeared, and that is partly down to Surfers Against Sewage. I have got my plastic-free Parliament water bottle, which it provided. I think it will be giving them to all MPs. If hon. Members have not got one yet, they should try to get hold of one—they are free. Advert over.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. She has stolen my point. I was going to praise Surfers Against Sewage, with which we both work very closely, for the significant role it has played not only in advancing a plastic-free Parliament, but in mobilising people across the country. It cleans up plastic in our seas and on our beaches, raises public awareness and provides education in schools to drive home the message that we cannot continue to use and dispose of plastic as we have done in recent decades. I join the hon. Lady in congratulating Surfers Against Sewage for its excellent work.

Graham Stringer: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. May I make the blindingly obvious point that we could immediately get rid of disposable plastic cups? It is a slight embarrassment in a debate like this that most of us are drinking out of them.

Steve Double: I think the one that the hon. Gentleman is holding up is biodegradable. There has been a commitment to use up the current stock of single-use plastic items and replace them with biodegradable ones. That is part of the single-use, plastic-free measures.

David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Plastic is not being used to wrap fruit and vegetables at the moment.

Steve Double: I take the point, Mr Hanson.

We must get the message across to retailers—particularly food retailers—that there is growing demand among the public to reduce the amount of plastic used in packaging our food, and particularly the plastic that is used unnecessarily to wrap our fresh fruit and vegetables. Parliament should continue to set an example, but I encourage the Government to take more action. I look forward to the Minister’s comments about the measures the Government can take to encourage responsible behaviour and reduce plastic packaging and plastic waste, which damages our environment.

I am happy to have introduced this debate. I am sure there will be some interesting contributions. There is a clear message from the public, and we must take notice of it.

4.56 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for his speech. He expressed many of the sentiments that I was hoping to express, but there is always repetition in debates. I am glad we all agree that we need to reduce the amount of plastic used in supermarkets.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the world has manufactured more plastic in the past decade than in the whole of the previous century. That is a startling fact. In 2015 alone, 292 million tonnes of plastic was produced, and that figure is expected to double by 2025. An estimated 12.7 million tonnes ends up in our oceans each year. Even more startlingly, that figure is expected to triple.

As the hon. Gentleman said, plastic never degrades completely, and it becomes part of our water supply. The UK’s tap water is now 72% contaminated with plastics. The public are more aware than ever of the problem, which is why this petition is so important. People are rightly demanding action.

Some 82% of people in the UK are worried about the impact of plastic pollution in our oceans. My constituents in Hampstead and Kilburn share those concerns and
relate them to me daily. They do not want future generations to grow up in a world in which there is more plastic in the ocean than fish.

Last week, I was proud to hear that Belsize Budgens in my constituency has shown serious leadership and announced dramatic cuts to its plastic packaging, at no extra cost to its consumers. I hope other supermarkets around the country will follow suit. I am pleased that the two borough councils in my constituency take recycling, which is obviously linked to the amount of plastic we use, very seriously. Camden Council has committed to boosting its recycling rates to 40% by 2020, and its recycling reward scheme, run in partnership with Local Green Points, has been shortlisted for two national recycling awards. Brent Council, which is also in my constituency, recycles 36% of its waste and is in the top half of London boroughs for recycling.

We should applaud that good news, but recycling is only part of the solution, as several hon. Members said.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** The hon. Lady is absolutely right that recycling is only part of what we should do. We all recycle in our own homes. In my house, recycling has overtaken the disposable stuff in the black bin—the blue bin has overtaken the black bin. Does she agree that one thing that has happened is that we have started to educate children at a very early age—at primary school and secondary school—and they take that back home to their parents? If we have an education programme, we have a good chance of changing the thoughts of everyone in the country through our children.

**Tulip Siddiq:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will mention schoolchildren later in my speech. It is important that we educate children and put recycling into the education system—I grew up not learning anything about recycling—so I will call on the Minister to do that.

Plastic can be recycled only a finite number of times. Recycling stems the tide of plastic waste going into landfills and oceans, but it will not completely stop it. We must acknowledge that recycling is expensive. Our cash-strapped local authorities spend £700 million a year collecting and treating packaging. Much plastic waste, including the film that is often used for fruit and vegetables, which the e-petition alludes to, is not currently recyclable.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay mentioned checking cauliflower packaging. I always check avocado packaging before I throw it in the bin, and it says it is not recyclable. We buy things that tend to be cheaper or say they last longer because they are in packaging, but when we go to do our bit to try to save the environment by recycling that packaging, it turns out that we cannot. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned that in supermarkets across the country, fruit and veg sold without packaging tend to be more expensive than packaged fruit and veg. I have certainly found that. That seems to be a contradiction, which should be looked at.

Some people suggest that rather than cutting down our plastic use, we should change the plastic we use. Bioplastics such as polylactic acid have been touted as a solution. They are made from maize, sugar cane, wheat and other crops, and are said to be compostable. However, such forms of plastic are not the magical solution that they appear to be. For a start, they can be composted only at specialist centres—importantly, they are not compostable for the vast majority of people—so it is not easy to ensure that we put them in the right place, and they take between 100 and 1,000 years to biodegrade in landfill. I think it is safe to say that if we go down the route of using those different kinds of plastic, none of us will be around to see them biodegrade.

Every time such alternative solutions are offered, we should think clearly about their implications. Crops such as corn require huge amounts of land, risking deforestation. That threatens our environment, our wildlife and our planet, which is already under threat. Technologies are developing and more environmentally friendly solutions are appearing all the time. Seaweed-based and even edible plastics may offer a better solution, but they may not be available for some time. On a planet with finite resources, we should be wary of replacing over-consumption of one kind of plastic with another.

The difficulties with those alternatives suggest that the real solution is dramatically to cut down our use of plastic, as the petitioners demand. As elected representatives, whichever fruit or vegetable we prefer—cauliflower or avocado—we need to support people to lead plastic-free lives and encourage future generations to realise the impact of plastic on the environment, wildlife and our planet.

With that in mind, will the Minister commit to increasing funding for plastics innovation? Will she work with local councils to improve recycling rates across the country, and with supermarkets to provide incentives for plastic-free packaging for fruit and vegetables? Will she commit to teaching children about the effects of using plastic and promoting a plastic-free life? Finally, can she give any update on the Prime Minister’s pledge in January to eliminate avoidable plastic waste by 2042? Does the Minister agree that that deadline is wholly inadequate?

5.3 pm

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) set out clearly the environmental aspects of the issue. I will not repeat what they said, but I acknowledge the truth of what they said and the enormous impact that plastic has on our environment.

We had a bit of a tour of people’s favourite fruit and vegetables—my hon. Friend mentioned the cauliflower and the hon. Lady mentioned the avocado. Let me add the cucumber to the list. My biggest bugbear with the cucumber is the plastic it is wrapped in. I do not know where my hon. Friend got his figure that most plastic lasts only minutes. It takes me minutes to get the plastic off the cucumber, let alone to dispose of it. I often end up having to extract bits of plastic from the salad I make with the cucumber because I was not able to get it all off.

The difficulty is that plastic plays an important part in the life of the cucumber. Without plastic the cucumber would probably last for a maximum of three days—that is the time it would take the water in it to evaporate—whereas with plastic it can last up to 14 days. I repeat what I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend: we need much more research and innovation to replace the sorts of plastics we currently use with new forms of covering that keep some of the characteristics of those plastics.
That leads to a number of other questions, including about the quantity of food we buy and the fact that there is little seasonality in the market. We can go out and buy anything the whole year round.

Mr Sheerman: I know that the hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about this subject. I beg everyone involved in this area to think holistically. We all know that we can get any fruit or vegetable at any time of the year, but it will probably have been flown 500 or 3,000 miles to get to our kitchen. I feel sympathy for him. I would hesitate to accept an invitation to eat a salad at his house. If he popped into a local farmers’ market, he might find something a lot fresher with no plastic.

John Howell: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. I was going to invite him to dinner, but since that would be refused—

Mr Sheerman: As long as it’s not salad, I’ll come.

John Howell: That is fine.

The hon. Gentleman is right that by popping into a farmers’ market one can get a cucumber raw, as it were. Like anyone else, I like to eat the things I like the whole year round, but I take the point that the economics of delivering them may mean they have been flown 3,000 or 5,000 miles. I question whether those economics are sound and sustainable in the long term. If that means I have to cut down on certain foods, I shall probably be none the poorer in health terms.

Turning for a moment from the cucumber to other fruit and veg, I notice that there has already been quite a development in fruit packaging, even in supermarkets. I think innovations have already been made in packaging for fruit, a lot of which is recyclable. Berries are a good example of that.

Jim Shannon: Most of us in the Chamber—there are a few exceptions—are probably of a vintage that means we can remember when everything was put in paper bags. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right—there is a fruit and veg store on every high street and a farmers’ market in every town, so there are still lots of opportunities in that respect. Does the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) agree that we should look at what more we can do with recycled newspapers, for instance? The resulting paper product may well be the answer. We can look at changing how people shop, but there may also be ways of changing packaging.

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The way we look at this issue is important. My district council always does very well on recycling, but it needs to look at non-recyclable elements such as plastic, which represent its biggest cost.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman touches on a very interesting area. Does he know that the evaluation we have done in the all-party parliamentary sustainable resource group looks at the quality of local authorities’ management of waste management? I beg him to consider what has happened in Oxford. The whole place has been transformed by good management and the city now makes money out of recycling rather than its being a cost to the local ratepayer.

John Howell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that suggestion. It is no problem at all for me to look at Oxford City; it is the next district council to mine. Both councils have very good recycling. I shall certainly look at that and see how it gets on.

I recently returned from a visit to Israel, and there were enormous markets everywhere with enormous quantities of fresh food and vegetables. People took along bags, ordered what they wanted—if they knew the seller very well, even feeling the product first—and simply put it in their bags. There was no packaging whatsoever. I do not yet claim to be so old as to remember some things, but I remember when that was the normal way of purchasing fruit and vegetables in my area. There is something about that that we should go back to.

When we go to markets overseas, there is an instant smell—almost as soon as we get off the plane—that is characteristic of that country and which comes to a large extent, from the raw fruit and vegetables and the herbs and spices that are produced there. They are not wrapped up and placed where they cannot be smelt. Smell is an important part of the debate, because if we cannot smell a product, how do we know whether it is fresh or ripe? The colour is perhaps an indication, but I have always gone by smell and touch. Those two things are two very important things, and it is insane, therefore, that we use so much packaging, for the environmental reasons but also because of our experience of and relationship with food.

A number of options are available, one of which is to buy smaller portions. We do not need to buy eight tomatoes if we are perhaps going to use only four. I also like the idea of the boxes of vegetables that are produced. I know that they are relatively expensive, but the vegetables come unwrapped. They are all the better for that, and you can get a good feel for them.

I know that plastic has a role in keeping food fresh and keeping dirty hands off it, but it would still be nice occasionally to see vegetables with the soil attached, before taking them home to wash and cook them. Plastic keeps sweat away from the vegetables and prevents contamination, but there must be other ways of doing that, using technology to overcome the problem.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very important point. Housewives want to see nice, clean products, with no soil or other materials in the bag. I cast my mind back to when we were all young at home and my mum would get 10 half-hundredweight bags of potatoes—there was a big family of us. They came in October and sat in the coldness of the shed until the following March—the whole winter—when they were finished. How is it that that could happen in those days, but today we cannot even keep a potato for a week?

John Howell: The hon. Gentleman asks a very valid question. Research done in schools showed that no one quite knew where vegetables came from. No one had ever seen vegetables with soil on, so no one knew that they came from the ground. Everyone thought that vegetables always came from the shop, and no one had a clue about where they came from before that. That is terrible, in terms of our relationship with food. I like to think of myself as a great foodie, and I like to have a relationship with food. The hon. Member for Strangford
(Jim Shannon) smiles and nods at me. He is very welcome to come and dine with me; I promise there will be no salad.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay made the point that consumer must take the lead. After the initial flurry of interest that got consumers thinking, there is great fear that consumer interest may have peaked. We must ensure that that peak remains high and that interest in what is right continues. I am sure that many things can be done. Education and the role of children are vital in maintaining that interest, but we can all do a lot to set a good example. I was pleased to see the royal family taking a lead in banning single-use plastic from the palaces.

That is probably as much as I wanted to say in this excellent debate. I will certainly do all I can to encourage people not to use plastic, and I hope that my problems with the cucumber will be well and truly solved in the near future.

5.17 pm

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing this extremely topical and very important debate. I admire his consistency on issues of environmental pollution and its effects on our everyday lives. His involvement with Surfers Against Sewage and many other organisations is to be commended.

The petition asks for supermarkets—we have not yet touched on the huge problem of commercial catering supplies—to offer customers an eco-friendly option of no packaging: a gesture of libertarian paternalism is required from major retailers, to offer their customers the choice of buying fruit and vegetables with or without plastic wrapping. Plastic-free aisles are a great nudge to focus all our minds on a waste and pollution-free environment. The petition has received nearly 125,000 signatures, and the number is growing, which shows that a great many people are very concerned about the issue.

There are several recycling initiatives out there, looking at how to recycle different products. That is always good to observe and hear about. For example, some companies are making efforts to solve their own packaging problems. Recently, the huge brand name of Kellogg’s announced a scheme whereby Pringles tubes can be posted to TerraCycle using freepost labels. Additionally, Colgate and TerraCycle have announced the launch of a Colgate oral care recycling programme, which is an interesting development. At face value, they seem to be good initiatives, but then confusion enters the dialogue.

Confusion comes by way of Simon Ellin, the chief executive officer of The Recycling Association, who has described the schemes as a fudge that does not solve the issues. The statements and initiatives are confusing and contradictory, and they prompt the question of whether the organisations are unable to have difficult conversations with one another. Do the Government have to initiate or host talks between these important corporations and organisations to resolve the aforementioned issues? I look forward to the Minister telling us whether she hosts any conversations between those organisations.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. He has highlighted some of the difficulties with recycling, which I think we understand, but does he agree that, for those reasons, focusing on reducing the amount of plastic used in the first place is better than trying to recycle what is used?

John McNally: I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said, and I will come to that point later.

Plastic food packaging that is not recycled is costing Scotland an estimated £11 million annually. That needs to change, and the Scottish Government are taking appropriate measures to address that problem. I congratulate the Westminster Government on following the example of the devolved Governments by, for example, introducing a plastic bag charge. Wales introduced a charge in 2011, and over the first year that the ban was in place, it achieved a 71% reduction in the number of bags used. Northern Ireland achieved a two-thirds reduction in bag use over the first year. Scotland achieved an 80% reduction in bag use in 2014, and after England introduced its 5p bag scheme, it achieved an 80% reduction in the first six months. Those are all good strides forward, and the absence of blue bags on our streets is probably the most visible achievement. We do not see those bags anymore.

Mr Sheerman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, faced with the dreadful dilemma of global warming, a plastic bag charge is a small part of what we can do? We are in the foothills. Should we not raise our game and look at the environment in the holistic sense? At least we should have a Government who see the damage. The hon. Gentleman knows, as I do, that we in this country were still burying our waste in holes in the ground until we became members of the European Union, which made us stop. As we come out of the European Union, we are going to be dragged back into the dark ages.

John McNally: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes good points. I assure him that we on the Environmental Audit Committee were warned about becoming the dirty man of Europe once again, and I hope that we will be given a reassurance today that we will not go down that path. I share the hon. Gentleman’s anxieties. We are at a pivotal moment when we can change these things, and the world is with us—probably through the work of the great David Attenborough, who has beautifully highlighted all the problems. I ask the Minister to reassure us that all retailers, rather than just a select few, will be charged accordingly, as happens in all the other home nations.

In 2017, the Scottish Government launched an initiative to develop a fit-for-purpose deposit return scheme to tackle everyday waste problems, such as single-use plastic and single-use items that are disposed of. I praise the UK Government for attending the summit in London in July this year, organised by the Scottish Government, to discuss how the home nations can co-operate to develop deposit return schemes that are fit for purpose, and nudge everyone into better habits when disposing of plastic and single-use items.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I apologise for arriving late to the debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the deposit return scheme involves substantial investment in reverse vending machines, costing upwards...
of £10,000, £15,000 or even £20,000, and that we would be better off spending that money on improving our recycling infrastructure to get more products recycled, which is what we all want?

John Mc Nally: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and there are two sides to the argument. We have to start somewhere—that is a certainty—and the way we are recycling at the moment is not the best way, which is a point that I hope to touch on later. I know that deposit retail schemes involve some complicated systems, but there may be ways to make them commercially viable that would get more people involved.

Mr Sheerman: Let’s do them both.

John Mc Nally: Exactly—why not do both? We would like to hear how those schemes can be developed, and that will have to happen across all the home nations and probably across the whole world.

We are all aware that there is a problem with how we dispose of, for example, plastic cotton buds. Those have been banned for years in America, but we are still using them here, which is unacceptable. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on flood prevention, I know those buds are a constant problem: they are used in schools and colleges, they go down waste pipes and plug holes, and they cost a fortune. They cause problems, including for insurance companies, so at the end of the day we all have to pay for them. Those problems are totally avoidable. We do not need those buds, and action has to be taken.

In Scotland, we are trying to ban the manufacture of plastic stem cotton buds. We announced our plans in January this year, and the UK Government followed in October. I believe that Wales is behind in this area, which is surprising: it has been leading on a lot of these policies, but it is behind the curve in this area.

I have visited supermarkets and other retailers in my constituency of Falkirk. They all recognise the need to reduce the quantity of plastic used in packaging for the sake of sustainability, and without a doubt customers also feel a desire to reduce the amount of plastic packaging they buy. Although that is a challenge, it could ultimately be a win-win situation for retailers: they could improve sustainability and cut packaging costs.

Those retailers are tackling that problem in creative ways, which is extremely encouraging. For example, they are seeking to eliminate the use of black plastic, so the plastic they do use can be easily sorted and recycled. Familiar items such as milk bottles and plastic trays are being redesigned to make them lighter, increase the use of recycled plastic in their manufacture, and eliminate the use of unnecessary and unrecyclable items.

However, I visited Dobbies in Perth last week—I was at a funeral in that city, and went for a cup of coffee with my wife—and there was an advert on a screen about how to use plastic when building up Christmas decorations. I thought, “How on earth can they be doing that in this day and age?” That should not have been on the screen at all.

Falkirk Council is phasing out single-use plastics in its offices and introducing initiatives to help communities recycle. TerraCycle, a UK-wide company, is helping communities arrange convenient pick-up points for recycling. Through Keep Scotland Beautiful and Zero Waste Scotland, the Scottish Government have funded initiatives such as Revive Falkirk, teaching people what they can do to reduce food waste and make low-carbon dietary and life choices as well as the skills they need to upcycle or repurpose discarded goods.

Small, often family-run companies such as Forth Valley Recycling & Packaging and Nathans Wastesavers in my home town of Denny are establishing themselves at the forefront of this new economic sector. The many ethical companies across Scotland and the UK need certainty that standards will be maintained and aligned post-Brexit. Will the Minister comment on whether the new policies that are coming forward will be aligned to those standards?

Plastic packaging is only part of the story. Making a concerted effort to effectively tackle this problem requires addressing issues such as fly-tipping and lack of public waste infrastructure—what we on the Environmental Audit Committee have called “binfrastructure”. It surely cannot be beyond the wit of manufacturers and local authorities across the UK to harmonise colour-coded bins to match colour-coded products. Why can we not have a green label to match a green bin, an amber label to match an amber bin, and a red label to match a red bin, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) touched on earlier? It is so confusing; nobody seems to know what to do when they get all their material together. We need to prevent waste going into our bins unnecessarily.

Last year, environmental prosecutions in England were at a record low. Responsibility for that was laid at the feet of local authorities in England, while simultaneously, those authorities’ funding was being slashed. That is short-termism at its absolute worst. The UK could learn a lot from Scotland’s collaborative approach, bringing together enforcing agencies and other stakeholders to tackle fly-tipping. The Scottish Government set up a national Environmental Crime Taskforce in 2013, which co-ordinates the efforts of local authorities, regulators, police and other stakeholders in tackling environmental crime, including waste crime. There are tools, and there is guidance to support them. For example, Zero Waste Scotland has created the FlyMapper tool for local authorities and land managers, which lets stakeholders report and map fly-tipping, identifying growing “grot spots” in real time.

Those are all good initiatives, but the petition to stop waste and plastic misuse gives a better option for the consumer by highlighting the need to prevent the problem from happening in the first place by going to the source: the manufacturing stage. I love that the petition acknowledges that change is required and suggests that supermarkets be put under scrutiny to ensure they are taking their corporate responsibilities seriously. That would be welcome.

To finish, I want to offer something personal. In my family, we like dirty carrots. My mother is 97, and when I go out she wants dirty carrots brought back. She does not want anything wrapped in plastic. We try to do exactly the same: we use locally grown produce, particularly from farm shops, markets and our local independent greengrocers. It is good practice. We know it cuts down on emissions and helps the local economy thrive. I am all for enabling local, independent greengrocers to thrive.
Sandy Martin: (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on leading an excellent debate and bringing it to the Chamber today. As he says, pollution from plastics is one of the biggest global pollution issues of our time. Although Britain is not alone in producing and using plastics, I believe that this country can and should be a beacon of good practice. What we in the developed world do will have real influence on what happens in the rest of the world.

The hon. Gentleman took an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) on having proper checks on our plastics exports, and I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s commitment in respect of alternatives for packaging and reductions in the amount of packaging. In particular, I welcome his support for the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made on education and simplifying packaging, so that we can maximise recycling.

I also welcome the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). We are all well aware of the news that has come out about plastic contamination of tap water. Alongside our worries about the natural world, public health worries are at the forefront of public concern about plastic pollution. It is leading to a real public move towards doing something about the scourge. I reiterate what my hon. Friend said about Camden Council’s recycling rewards scheme. Will the Government investigate using national financial incentives to roll out best practice across local authorities? Whatever we do about recycling and waste minimisation, it has to be done with central Government working in conjunction with local authorities. Whatever we do must be founded on knowledge and a scientific appreciation of what happens to different types of plastic. We need the Government to take a lead on that.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned cucumbers. I must admit that at first I assumed that he was saying that cucumbers do not need to be wrapped at all. I have a greengrocer just across the road from me in my constituency; none of its cucumbers are wrapped, and I have never seen a rotten cucumber there. The hon. Gentleman may well be right that cucumbers last a bit longer when they are wrapped up, but plenty of fruit and vegetables do not last longer wrapped. I have always thought that bananas come in the perfect natural wrapping and really do not need additional wrapping, and I suspect that in many other cases wrapping contributes nothing to the fruit or vegetable’s keeping.

Mark Pawsey: In fact, cucumbers are probably an example of the most effective use of polythene wrap. It is a tiny amount of packaging, but it can prolong the life of a cucumber by up to 10 days. The hon. Gentleman says that he has not seen cucumbers in plastic wrapping, but he will almost certainly have seen significant amounts of food waste where fruit and vegetables that are not appropriately wrapped are allowed to rot.

Sandy Martin: I think the hon. Gentleman misunderstood me. I said that I had not seen cucumbers wrapped in plastic at my local greengrocer; obviously in supermarkets they are. My suspicion is that that is because the cucumbers in my local greengrocer never stay there for more than a day, as he only gets in as many as he is going to sell.

John Howell: If the hon. Gentleman has ever seen bananas growing in plantations, he will have seen that the fruit is wrapped in blue plastic bags to keep animals and insects away from it. Its natural state is not always enough.

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I have actually seen bananas growing in their natural habitat; not only that, but I helped plant them out, maintained irrigation systems and chopped the plants down at the end of the year when they were finished and the new sprouting plant needed to grow up. I have eaten bananas fresh off the plant, as well. That was in the 1970s, and I have to say that the bananas were not wrapped up in blue plastic and did not seem to suffer much as a result. I very much agree, however, that we need more research into what does and does not work and how we can ensure that best practice is used to reduce waste, not only of plastic but of the thing being wrapped.

The world faces a pollution crisis from plastics. Some 400 million tonnes of plastic will be produced this year; as we have heard, it is estimated that 12 million tonnes of that will end up in the ocean, and the problem continues to grow. Pollution is not the only problem; the use of plastics contributes to climate change, as most plastics are made from fossil fuels. Approximately 6% of global oil production is used for making plastics, and that figure will grow. The Chinese plan to increase their use of coal as the main feedstock for plastics, and the US has extensive plans to increase the use of shale gas extracted by fracking for making plastics. According to DEFRA’s modelling, in 2017 the UK’s 42 incinerators released a combined total of nearly 5 million tonnes of CO₂ from the incineration of fossil-based materials, predominantly plastics. Even if the incinerator generates electricity, burning plastic in an incinerator produces around 2.5 times less useful energy output for that CO₂ than would have been obtained from the direct use of the original fossil fuel as fuel.

Public awareness of the issue is strong. I urge the Minister to consider that the time for action is now. The Government could make a regulation now that met the demands of the petition, which has about 125,000 signatures. A further petition organised by Friends of the Earth calling for Government action on plastics pollution now has 187,000 signatures. Any action must deal with the actual problems. If we are to have effective action, we need to understand what the problems are.

In response to the petition, the Government say: “Packaging has an important and positive role to play in reducing product damage, increasing shelf-life, and reducing food waste.” However, plastic packaging on fresh fruit and vegetables may contribute to food waste: by offering a fixed packaged quantity, people may be induced to buy more than they need, as the hon. Member for Henley mentioned. Also, the amount of waste may be disguised. Rather than damaged food being thrown away by the supermarket, the customer may well find damaged fruit or vegetables inside the plastic packaging and then throw them away in the household. Also, I question whether most fresh fruit and vegetables are given an enhanced shelf life by being wrapped in plastic.
Even when fruit and vegetables are offered loose to the general public, often the only way of taking them to the checkout is in plastic bags because no paper bags are provided. I support the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who is no longer in her place. Providing paper bags for people to choose to use if they want to avoid using plastic is something that every supermarket could do. I am glad to hear that Morrisons is doing just that.

The Government have promised, “a four point plan taking action at each stage of the product lifecycle—production, consumption and end of life.” However, recycling is only a part of any solution to the problem of plastic. Eunomia, working for Friends of the Earth, estimated that only 9% of all plastic ever produced has been recycled. The Guardian has published estimates that about 800,000 tonnes of plastic packaging waste each year emanates from supermarkets, so our No. 1 priority must be to reduce the amount of plastic used in the first place. The best way to start is to identify applications that are unnecessary, and I suggest that wrapping fresh fruit and vegetables in plastic is one such application.

Local Government Association analysis published on 4 August 2018 suggests that only a third of plastic used by households is capable of being recycled. Most waste collection and sorting systems are unable to deal with film and bags, which are the main plastic items associated with the sale of fresh fruit and vegetables, so the expectation is that almost none of the plastics that the petition addresses are recyclable. The answer, surely, is to prevent them from being used in the first place.

What do the Government intend to do? Labour will support actions that reduce harmful pollution from plastics, but I am not clear that the Government know what those actions might be. Will a tax on packaging with less than 30% recycled material actually reduce the amount of plastic getting into the environment? I am not sure. We have still to see the details. Whatever the Government do, they need to act before 2022, when the proposed “30% or less” tax would be implemented, if they are to meet their stated aim to recycle 70% by 2025 and eliminate plastic by 2042.

The Government also talk about encouraging voluntary selective plastic-free aisles in a small number of supermarkets. Of course that would be a good step forward, but it is not enough. When The Guardian surveyed the major supermarkets, none was willing to commit to setting up plastic-free aisles, despite the Prime Minister’s optimism last week, and only two supermarkets—Aldi and the Co-op—were open about the amount of plastic packaging that they put on to the market.

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Gentleman has already talked about the large number of people who are concerned about the plastic used in supermarkets, but supermarkets do what their customers want. Why does he think supermarkets have used plastic packaging as they have?

Sandy Martin: I do not agree that supermarkets do what customers want. They do whatever will induce the customer to purchase the majority of their food at the supermarket. Plastic is not necessarily what people want if they are given a choice, but very often, as has been said, customers in a supermarket do not have a choice, so we cannot say that the supermarket is doing what the customer wants. Clearly, if customers do not have a choice, they take what the supermarket offers them. For instance, when I go into a supermarket to buy some of my fruit and vegetables, I normally do not have a choice as to what bag to put them into. I do not put loose tomatoes into a supermarket shopping trolley; if I had a paper bag to put them in, I would put them into that, but if there is only a plastic bag, perforce I have to put them into that.

Mark Pawsey: Would the paper bag provide the protection for the tomatoes that the plastic tray with the cellophane wrap provides?

Sandy Martin: I do not believe that tomatoes need that level of protection. If one treats them carefully, as I always do when I am in a supermarket, I put them into a bag, and there is no way that a paper bag would provide less protection than a plastic bag. However, the paper bag is compostable and the plastic bag is not.

We need the forthcoming environment Bill, promised by the Prime Minister in July this year, to contain clear actions for dealing with plastics based on comprehensive knowledge of current problems and science-based understanding of the impacts. We are waiting to hear what the Government propose to do to ensure that the environment Bill contains effective measures to combat plastics pollution.

Too often we have seen half-hearted and piecemeal gimmicks from the Government. What is needed is wholesale, systemic change. In the meantime, I urge the Minister to take the petition seriously and to consider whether a mandatory requirement for fresh fruit and vegetables to be made available without plastic packaging would be desirable and possible.

5.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for presenting the debate. I repeat his congratulations to Edmund Pendrous on tabling the petition. I welcome the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) to his place. I believe it is his first contribution to a debate from the Front Bench. I am sure he will continue speaking in that role for some time on a variety of topics in which I know he has a particular interest.

I tend to respond by outlining the steps the Government are taking on the issues raised, but I am conscious that Members have talked today about a much wider variety of matters than were raised in the petition. The important issue of plastic waste is recognised by people across the country and around the world, so we in government will continue to do whatever we can to reduce avoidable waste and plastic pollution. I am confident that the Government will do many things, although I might have to disappoint some Members today because some of those things will emerge from the resources and waste strategy, which we intend to publish soon.

The Government share Members’ concerns. In answer to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), we set out in the 25-year environment plan our ambition to achieve zero avoidable plastic waste. That
does not mean that everything waits until 2042—she will be aware of some of the actions that we are already taking on microbeads. The hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) is right that it was the Welsh Government who initiated the concept of a levy on plastic bags, which we then adopted in 2015, and there has been a huge response to that around the country. We are undertaking other activities that might be small steps in the minds of some people, but are important in sending a clear leadership message, which is having an impact not only in this country but in other parts of the world.

The UK uses about 5 million tonnes of plastic every year, half of which is packaging, and demand for the material continues to rise. We particularly want to reduce demand for single-use plastic items, promote better use of materials in circulation, and increase the volume of plastic sent for recycling.

As I indicated, we have introduced certain measures already. We are looking at the deposit return scheme, which the hon. Member for Falkirk referred to. He is aware that the four nations are discussing that matter. From a consumer and industrial perspective, it would make sense to agree one scheme, but we do not want to hold up other nations that consider themselves more advanced in developing the scheme. I am having a meeting next week with Ministers from Wales and Scotland and with officials from Northern Ireland to see how far we can progress that. We recently launched a consultation on plastic straws, drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds. We know that industry has responded well already, but going further will eliminate the availability of such items. However, we have some exemptions with regard to disability issues and a specific issue regarding the Home Office.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay referred to the important measure announced in the Budget to introduce a specific tax for products containing less than 30% recycled plastic, if companies come forward in future with such products. That will stimulate a market for recycled plastics. At the moment, we are talking about two kinds of plastic that have a market in this country. Of course, plastics can be sold abroad, and we take advantage of such opportunities. Some of those markets are closing in terms of quality—probably the most prominent example is China—but other countries want our plastic to create packaging, which they then use to send products to this country.

The timeframe that we give to manufacturers to make the adjustment and to do the research and innovation so that they can switch is important. At the moment, a good example is the classic plastic milk bottle, which has been carefully designed to try to reduce the amount of plastic and the amount of carbon generated as a result. However, owing to food safety issues it needs to have a certain kind of virgin plastic in order to prevent leaching of plastic into the milk. There are certainly areas where research and innovation are required, as has been said multiple times by hon. Members. That is why we have already announced the £20-million plastics research and innovation fund, to which we have added a further £20 million—£10 million specifically for research and development, and £10 million for getting better at ensuring that plastic that is used is recycled in a variety of ways.

Reference was made to products such as plastic cups, and the topic of biodegradable plastics came up a few times. We need to be careful about compostable and biodegradable material and ensure that any future infrastructure will be able to deal with such material appropriately, because at the moment the majority of infrastructure in this country is not set up to deal with it. Certainly people cannot just put anything that markets itself as compostable into the compost tips in their gardens; it needs to be processed in a particular way, on an industrial scale.

It is a bit like some of the challenges that some coffee cup retailers have been experiencing. At the moment, a plastic liner remains an element. It is possible to recycle those products, and there are about four of five places in the country that do it; the challenge is how we get the cups back to those recycling places. Of course, for other sorts of cartons there is really only one place in the country where recycling can be done. So far, councils seem to have been a lot more effective at using household recycling to get those products there.

Mark Pawsey: Does the Minister agree that were a manufacturer to place on the market a material that is incredibly low cost in use and capable of being coloured in a variety of colours, manipulated into all sorts of shapes, and recycled, we would hail it as a wonder material, rather than denigrating it, as has seemed to be the case in much of this afternoon’s debate?

Dr Coffey: I know my hon. Friend feels passionately about this subject. It is important not to demonise plastic entirely, but we need to consider taking the holistic approach to the environment to which hon. Members have referred. I understand what he says, but at the moment there is not a huge market for some of the products that are technically recyclable. That is what we are trying to change and to stimulate.

I have already referred to the tax that was announced in the Budget. We also intend to reform the packaging producer responsibility system, which will increase producer responsibility for the cost of all their packaging waste, including plastic. The system will provide an incentive for producers to design packaging that is easier to recycle and will penalise the use of difficult-to-recycle packaging.

Recognising the global challenge, the Prime Minister announced an unprecedented package earlier this year at the Commonwealth summit. We have come together with other Commonwealth nations to establish the Blue Charter, and the United Kingdom and Vanuatu are co-chairing the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance. About £66 million of UK aid has been made available to boost global research and to help countries across the Commonwealth to stop plastic entering the oceans, which was one of the key motivations behind today’s petition.

As part of the package of support, this September we launched the Global Plastics Action Partnership alongside the Canadian Government to help to deliver on those goals. The partnership will bring businesses, Governments and other organisations together to develop country action plans to address the plastics problem. Companies such as Coca Cola, PepsiCo and the Dow Chemical Company are already supporting it, and several others are in discussions. We have invested £2.4 million in that initiative alone; the funding has been matched by the Canadian Government, and we believe that further commercial partners will come on board.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said, one of the challenges of plastics occurs when they leak out of the system. Addressing the problem is not solely about legislation; it is also about management. However, we need a shift in how we think about how to reduce avoidable waste. One of the things that has been said today is how much consumers need to change their behaviour. I agree that we need to get consumers themselves to consider changing their behaviour, but we know that retailers are a key way of getting them to do that, as are manufacturers.

The convenience of getting all of one’s shopping in the same place has been a big driver for supermarket shopping, as opposed to visiting a local greengrocer or going to the market, so we want retailers to act responsibly. We are working with them and the Waste and Resources Action Programme, WRAP, to encourage efforts to reduce waste and to explore the introduction of plastic-free supermarket initiatives in which food is loose, giving consumers the choice.

WRAP and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation launched their plastics pact with support from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and 80 businesses, including some non-governmental organisations and service providers. The pact aims to make all plastic packaging reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025. Participants will also work together to recycle or compost 70% of plastic packaging, while striving to eliminate single-use plastics. A week or so ago, we also supported the Ellen MacArthur Foundation’s new plastics economy global commitment. We are one of just a handful of Governments that have signed up to that. It is important to lead by example and support such important global initiatives.

Returning to the debate about wrapping cucumbers or cauliflowers in plastic, such practices are an important part of innovation with regard to increasing shelf life and reducing food waste. I understand that the hon. Member for Ipswich is a bit sceptical about balancing the two, but keeping food fresher for longer through innovations such as vacuum packing and resealable packs has a significant impact on extending the life of many products and reducing waste. If a product is wasted due to insufficient packaging, the costs of disposal can often have a greater environmental impact than the packaging itself. We need to strike the delicate balance between the two. Food waste in itself is a huge environmental and financial issue. It is suggested that more than 10 million tonnes of food and drink waste arise annually in the UK after the farm gate.

We are taking a comprehensive approach to tackle the problem. With WRAP we launched the Courtauld commitment 2025 in March 2016. That brings together organisations right across the food system—from producers to consumers—to try to make food and drink production and consumption more sustainable. However, there may be opportunities where offering food loose may help to reduce plastic waste while not affecting shelf life. That is why we have worked with WRAP and retailers to explore the potential for introducing plastic-free initiatives. WRAP will publish a technical report on the evidence for providing fresh produce loose, and what the differences are.

Many examples have been referred to, and the cucumber is probably the classic one. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) might have been thinking of the Henley royal regatta and the many cucumber sandwiches that are consumed on those days. He will perhaps need to talk to his local food providers, because if people know that they will get through a large number of cucumbers in one or two days, clearly plastic wrapping is not required. I appreciate that the cucumbers might get a bit bruised, but I think they are reasonably hardy.

The cucumber is probably the best example, which is why it is used so often. Instead of the shelf life being two to three days, it is extended to 12 to 15 days with packaging. Without revealing every element of the WRAP technical report, which is due to be published soon, the evidence suggests that there are other products where there is a real environmental improvement to be had from packaging. Those include soft fruits, cherries, berries, raspberries, salad leaves—the bags of salad that regularly get used when people do not feel that they have the time to deal with all that—herbs, grapes, spinach and cabbage. I have not found out about cauliflower, but I will, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay will read the report carefully. WRAP suggests that with those products, there is real evidence that packaging matters in extending the shelf life. The report indicates that there are some other products where it does not particularly make a big difference—carrots are an example.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair)

This comes back to consumer choice. I think that people have got used to picking up elements of this, and I am pleased to see that there have been initiatives; I have certainly noticed them in my local shopping experience. We are seeing a change, and the decision is now being given back to consumers for them to make a positive choice about, for example, using paper bags or collecting stuff loose, and whether produce can be conveniently grouped together—a bunch of bananas is probably the best example of that, as compared with trying to pick up six peaches.

One thing that I hope that the report will be useful in doing—we hope WRAP will publish this by the end of the month—is a bit of consultation, which will give both retailers and manufacturers an opportunity to consider the best way to take this forward, particularly with signatories to the Courtauld commitment and the UK plastics pact. Further to that, we are working with Morrisons to evaluate its current trial of selling uncut, fresh produce plastic-free or loose. The project will provide an independent, evidence-based appraisal of a plastic-free initiative and explore the effects on food waste of reducing plastic packaging. This will inform further retailer and supplier action under the Courtauld commitment and the plastics pact.

The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn referred to a Budgens branch in Belsize Park, which I believe is a franchise run by Mr Andrew Thornton. Understandably, he recently received some good publicity for his commitment to try to reduce plastic packaging at Budgens and at his other store in Crouch End. There may be other suppliers available, but I want to flag this as a good, local example. I think that they are trying to do something that, as has already been alluded to, people see in their local greengrocer’s. I am conscious that this is part of his community supermarket idea, which he, as the franchise operator, is bringing in to run under the broader Budgens brand.

Other retailers have made good progress with tackling plastics. Waitrose recently published two reports, one of which, on consumer research, highlighted the increase in customer awareness of plastic pollution. The other
report is the Waitrose & Partners plastics plan, which has been published to communicate the company’s commitment to eliminate unnecessary plastic and to explain how they are going about it, whether it is through packaging, products, customer engagement or across the supply chain.

There are opportunities and funding for innovation and redesign, which is important. The United Kingdom has signed up to the circular economy directive, and it is our intention to continue that; I think it is a really important way to proceed. We are ambitious about recycling rates, but many Members will be aware that we are sometimes driven by the weight system instead of by the actual issue, and I expect we will consider that in the future. We are committed to making those changes.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay referred repeatedly to how youth have responded to the issue of reducing plastic packaging, and how they want solutions to be provided. I certainly agree with that. Black plastic has been discussed. Black plastic is recyclable, but not all councils have invested through their contracts in facilities that can identify black plastic as it goes through; there is a certain kind of pigment that can be picked out. One thing that we need to consider is how plastic is used in our food chain. There are reasons why black plastic is used. It is not just for image; it has a function, but there may be opportunities to use different things. By the end of the year, I expect retailers and manufacturers to propose a solution to improve the polymers and reduce the number of polymers that are used in a wide variety of products. Again, that is about trying to make it easier to recycle.

I am sure that many of us are lobbied regularly by our constituents about bin collections. We will have more to say on that in the resources and waste strategy, so I will hold off from talking about it further. I have largely managed to cover the points relevant to the petition that were raised today, but I want to say that we are working with the industry, which has committed to implementing solutions. These matters are on track, but there are some difficult challenges to overcome in innovation, particularly in relation to drinks containers. One of the solutions that we have identified will be taken forward through the UK plastics pact and will ensure that all plastic packaging is recyclable by 2025.

I thank again the petitioners who signed this petition and helped us to have this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay for opening the debate.

6.6 pm

Steve Double: I want to sum up by thanking all hon. Members for their participation. Once again, I thank all the petitioners who signed the petition and enabled this debate to happen. I am sure this is an issue that we will keep coming back to—it is clearly something that many people care deeply about. There is an increasing awareness of the impact on our environment of the amount of plastic that we use and discard. I very much welcome the Minister’s response, which clearly showed that the Government are grasping this issue. As has been said, it needs to be done in balance, particularly when it comes to food packaging: we need to balance environmental concerns with the benefits that plastic offers for preserving food and extending its shelf life.

I thank everyone who has participated today. I am sure that, as we continue to engage with the public and the industry and to take a lead as Parliament, we will continue to reduce the amount of plastic waste that we produce, which can only be a good thing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 222715 relating to plastic-free packaging for fruit and vegetables.

6.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 13 November 2018

[Ms Nadine Dorries in the Chair]

Climate Change: Extreme Weather Events

9.30 am

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered extreme weather events related to climate change.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Dorries. Several hon. Members send their apologies, because of a clash with an Environmental Audit Committee visit about sustainable fashion. Many of the normal suspects were sad not to be present. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. It is a particular treat to be given the opportunity to lead it, not least because it is my birthday.

When the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its recent report on 6 October, I assumed that we would have time to debate it on the Floor of the House. Any IPCC report should warrant that level of political attention, but that special report tells us that all the warning lights are on red and that we have 12 years to limit global temperature growth to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels or face extreme changes to the way we live our lives.

I welcome the Government’s clean growth strategy and the passing remarks of the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth about the IPCC report in her statement on Green GB Week, but, with respect, heralding a letter from the Government to the Committee on Climate Change asking for advice on what to do next is not good enough. The House of Commons is supposed to be at the heart of the national and international debate. What we do here adds volume to the news that people across the UK see and hear. Shamefully, the IPCC was unsuccessful. When Parliament is not sitting in the summer, we cannot debate. It is vital that we understand the consequences today of world climate change.

The Government’s response to that significant report was not proportionate to the report’s conclusion, which was that limiting global warming to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels “would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.”

Global net human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide need to fall by 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 and reach net zero around 2050.

That was a lot of information, but the degree and scope of change required to limit and stop temperature growth is enormous. I fail to understand why this debate was not led prominently on the Floor of the House of Commons by the Prime Minister, rather than in Westminster Hall for 90 minutes at the third attempt by an Opposition Back Bencher to force the Government to the table. The report is not just a warning about the future or an academic hypothesis; it is about what is happening around the world today. The co-chair of the IPCC working group said:

“One of the key messages that comes out very strongly from this report is that we are already seeing the consequences of 1 °C of global warming through more extreme weather, rising sea levels and diminishing Arctic sea ice, among other changes.”

I will read through some of the headline extreme weather events of this year. In January, a mud slide following rainstorms in California resulted in 18 deaths. Since March, floods in east Africa have accounted for almost 500 deaths. In May, a dust storm caused by high temperatures in India killed 127 people. In June, a monsoon followed by a landslide in Bangladesh caused 12 deaths. A summer of heatwaves across the northern hemisphere, experienced in Britain too, resulted in 65 deaths in Pakistan, 80 deaths in Japan, more than 90 deaths in Canada, 42 deaths in South Korea and 20 deaths in Greece, and, on the best available data, up to 259 deaths were attributed to high temperatures in the UK.

In June and July, floods in Japan led to 225 more deaths, and more than 8 million people were advised to evacuate. In July, wildfires in Greece resulted in 99 deaths. Throughout August, we saw the news of floods in Kerala in India, which caused 483 deaths as of 30 August and forced more than 1 million people into relief camps. Throughout the summer, wildfires in California, which are being dealt with again as we speak, resulted in tens of thousands of evacuations. In September, a typhoon in Japan caused 1.19 million evacuations and seven deaths. A typhoon in the Philippines, China and Taiwan led to nearly 2.7 million evacuations and 134 deaths.

A hurricane in the USA led to up to 1.7 million evacuations and 51 deaths. In October, in another hurricane in the USA, half a million people were ordered to evacuate and there were 45 deaths. In October, flooding in the south of France left 13 dead. Towards the end of August, another typhoon in the South China sea left 15 dead. Those are only some of the extreme weather events in 2018 alone.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) tabled urgent questions on our return from the summer recess to try to debate the issue, but he was unsuccessful. When Parliament is not sitting in the summer, we cannot debate. It is vital that we understand the consequences today of world climate change.

To put that list into an historical frame, the World Meteorological Organisation claims that there was a 20% increase in extreme weather-related deaths between 2001 and 2010, which means that at least 370,000 people have died as a consequence of extreme weather around the world—an increase in the number of heatwave-related deaths from 6,000 to 136,000. Extreme heat in the Arctic, coral bleaching in the Great Barrier reef, increased wildfires in the western United States, extreme rainfall in China and drought conditions across South Africa are not just bad weather; they are costing lives, and an estimated $660 billion in economic loss, which is a 54% increase in the costs associated with extreme weather since 2001.

The issue does not just affect other countries; it is about Britain too. We have already heard about the increased number of deaths as a consequence of heat in Britain. The Met Office helpfully published a report
in November that concluded that the extreme weather we are facing today in the UK is due to climate change. The report shows that it is hotter for longer in the summer and wetter for longer in the winter, with more rainfall from extreme weather events than ever before.

That is why we are building flood sea defences in Avonmouth in my constituency to prevent my constituents from being flooded by sea level rises due to climate change. It is also why I and so many of my constituents are trying to build renewable energy solutions, albeit without much luck to date on tidal energy, given the Government’s decision to pull funding for the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. My constituency has two islands in the Severn estuary—Steep Holm and Flat Holm—which means my boundaries include a big chunk of the second-largest source of tidal power in the world, but nothing is there to harbour its energy. The Government need to move much more quickly.

The National Farmers Union has made a clear case about the impact of extreme weather on British agriculture. Flooding on farms causes damage to critical infrastructure and property, loss of power, impassable roads and bridges, damage to farmable land and a cost of at least £70 million in direct losses to businesses, before the indirect costs of damage to infrastructure and regional economies are even considered.

In other parts of the world, people are having to live in the most unsatisfactory of conditions. Otto Simpson, a doctoral student from Oxford University, recently emailed me. He had partnered with a Swedish filmmaker to produce a documentary in Bangladesh that shows how women and girls are being disproportionately affected by climate-related displacement. It tells the story of an unnamed woman, now 18, whose family home in Bangladesh was washed away by floods. She and her family moved to Dhaka to look for work but arrived in an overcrowded city already struggling to meet the needs of climate migrants, with no jobs to hand and a shortage of food for those looking for it. Today, forced into being a sex worker, she is the main provider for her family and brings home between £120 and £180 per month, which is merely enough to pay the rent for one room for her, her parents and her younger siblings. That is a direct consequence of the extreme weather—the flooding—in Bangladesh.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre in Geneva estimates that more than 20 million people around the world have been forced to leave their homes temporarily or permanently due to ever more extreme weather. We have seen the official statistics today about the millions of people being advised to evacuate their homes. That may seem unusual for us in Britain, but we should pause and think about what that means. Imagine if the whole of Bristol or London were asked to evacuate. What would that mean for people’s lives? What would be the consequences for the way we manage cities and the country? Imagine if homes were flooded and we had climate migration in our country. The Government’s response would be significant and robust. That is happening around the world today, and as a global partner we have an obligation to ensure that this issue remains high on the agenda. We must not lose focus on the size of the challenge, the speed at which the change is coming and the impact on us and other humans across the globe.

The immediate challenge is to limit temperature growth to 1.5 °C. The Paris accord said that we must limit it to 2 °C or less, but the IPPC said we must meet 1.5 °C within the next 12 years. If we fail to stop global temperature growth, the world will radically change. Models published in the New Scientist suggest that a world that is 4 °C warmer than pre-industrial levels would result in the United States, South America, central and southern Europe, Africa, the middle east, India, China, Japan and most of Australia being uninhabitable—gone. A 4 °C rise means a world without the United States, China and India—that could happen within my daughter’s lifetime. We would be left with a world dominated by Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland, northern Europe and the Nordics, Russia and whoever ends up owning western Antarctica, which would have thawed in the 4 °C model, and might be somewhere that people need to live.

Our ability to grow and ship food around the world would change fundamentally. The way in which we build our cities and live would change. The way we generate and distribute energy would radically change. If we think we have a problem with countries relying on gas from Russia today, imagine a world in which Russia is the main place to live and the main source of our food. The geopolitics would be very different. Climate migration would dwarf the demands of today’s immigration flows, which are caused by war or economic migration. If we think the immigration that Europe faces is a problem, imagine dealing with a world in which many countries are no longer places that humans can live.

We must do everything we can to ensure that that is not the legacy we leave to our grandchildren. This is not just about where we live, what we eat and our energy; it is about national security, defence and geopolitics. If Russia is connected to the United States because the ice in the northern hemisphere has thawed, the way in which defence is resourced in the world will change fundamentally.

The UK has a proud record on tackling climate change, but we must do more at home and, fundamentally, more abroad. What role is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office playing in ensuring that every country in the world signs up to the Paris accord? We are missing Russia, which accounts for 5% of global emissions. We are missing Turkey and Iran, whose oil and natural gas exports account for 77% of its carbon emissions—again, that is an example of why we need to move at speed to a world in which we are not reliant on oil. We are missing Colombia, which has 10% of the Amazon rainforest within its borders. Illegal tree logging accounts for more carbon emissions than transportation. We are also missing a handful of others.

This is not just about the countries that did not sign up to the Paris accord in the first place. The President of the United States has signalled his intention to withdraw the country’s support, and the new President of Brazil has threatened to do the same. Brazil, of course, accounts for 4.1 gigatonnes of carbon emissions due to deforestation.

I find this amazing. I am disappointed that this debate is not receiving the highest levels of attention and that the UK is not forcing this issue up the national and international agenda. I applaud the efforts we are taking with the clean growth strategy and investment under the industrial strategy and on our own carbon emissions. The previous Labour Government had a
proud record: they instigated the Climate Change Act 2008, and the Energy and Climate Change Committee is very good, but the speed and breadth are not good enough. Of course, we can be as good as we wish in the United Kingdom, but if the rest of the world does not follow, we all suffer.

I hope the Minister will take the opportunity to help raise the volume, and I hope she agrees that we should have a proper debate on IPPC reports on the Floor of the House of Commons annually. Perhaps the first should be after the Energy and Climate Change Committee’s advice is received next spring. I hope she will set out the work being done across Government to ensure not only that this is a strategy in the energy team at the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—as important as that is—but that it affects every Department. What requirements have been placed on the Department for International Trade to drive this agenda as it secures new trade deals around the world?

I also hope the Minister will set out how the Government will build on their current plans to significantly increase the speed and breadth of their clean growth strategy. I again remind her of the IPPC report’s words: it said that we need “unprecedented changes” in all areas of our lives. I hope she will confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with all its diplomatic might and soft power around the world, is keeping this issue high on the agenda so that we bring every country with us on this historic and vital journey to a sustainable planet.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. May I just say that it is usual for MPs to discuss terms of address with the Chair before the debate begins? I prefer “Ms Dorries”, “Chairwoman”—“woman” being the noun for an adult human female—or simply “Chair”, but not “Chairperson”.

9.47 am

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on initiating this hugely important debate. I share his disappointment that it has not attracted a slightly larger audience, although my colleagues on the Environmental Audit Committee have a legitimate excuse: they are at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of a session looking at sustainable fashion.

It is always tempting to point to individual weather extremes and ascribe them to climate change. This year, we had heavy snowfall in March and the joint hottest summer on record. This is not about taking individual weather events and attributing them directly to climate change. That would be bad science, and would be easy to debunk and discredit. It is about looking at the overall trends, both here and globally, which do show a significant increase in extreme weather. The hon. Gentleman has given lots of examples, and I will briefly look at some additional ones.

The most recent Met Office report, of 2 November, which has already been cited, makes really depressing reading. It compares UK weather data from 1961 to 1990—30 years—with the 10 years between 2008 and 2017. It is pretty clear that the UK is experiencing an increase in weather extremes. The hottest days have become hotter, the number of warm spells has increased and the coldest days are not as cold. On average, the hottest day in each year over the past 10 years is 0.8°C hotter than it was in previous decades. The coldest days are also warmer: temperatures were an average of 1.7°C warmer in the past decade. So-called tropical nights, on which temperatures remain over 20°C, have also increased. In the 30 years between 1961 and 1990, there were eight such tropical nights. In the 10 years between 2008 and 2017, there were four, and we had two more this year.

The Met Office’s conclusion is that those extremes are consistent with overall man-made warming of the UK climate over the past 50 years, and the global trends are showing the same pattern. Globally, the five warmest years in recorded history have taken place since 2010, and 2014 was the hottest year ever recorded until 2015 and 2016. The warmest year on record was 2016, and eight months in that year were the warmest individual month recorded.

If the science is right and the trends continue, we will see appalling consequences: increasing food shortages, lands becoming uninhabitable, and refugees on a scale that we as a species have never had to deal with before. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees tells us that already, on average, 21.5 million people are displaced each year because of weather-related, sudden-onset hazards. It describes climate change as a “threat multiplier” for people in conflict zones—and it goes without saying that it is bad news for the balance of nature as well.

The difficulty with climate systems is that they are so complex that no computer model on earth can fully capture and take on board the full range of feedback, positive and negative. That means that those who seek to pour doubt on the overwhelming scientific consensus on the subject will always be able to do so, if that is what they want to do. The same goes for the consequences of climate change.

However, there is a fairly basic calculation to make. On the one hand, what would be the effect of listening to the sceptics, ignoring the overwhelming body of scientific evidence pointing to man-made climate change, and then being wrong? The turbulence and change would likely bring about an end to civilisation as we know it. The impacts on the natural world would be incalculable. It is not inconceivable that this fragile, precious planet that we live on would be altered to such an extent that it would no longer be able to sustain us as a species. That is the downside.

On the other hand, what would be the effect of listening to the scientific consensus, taking the necessary action and then being proven wrong? Accidentally, we would end up with a cleaner and eventually much cheaper energy system, protecting more of the world’s forests and ecosystems, and with an economic system that is more circular and less wasteful. It has always amazed me, in fact, that there is anyone who would look at that basic calculation and conclude that we are better off doing nothing. That just makes no sense. Indeed, almost everything that we need to do to tackle climate change is something that we would want to do irrespective of climate change.

What is interesting or, rather, infuriating is that over the years that I have been engaged on this issue—20 years ago, I used to edit The Ecologist magazine—the debate has consistently and conveniently shifted. At the beginning,
we were told for years that climate change simply was not happening. Then we heard from the same people, “Well, it is happening, but it is nothing to do with our species.” A few years later, we would hear from the same people, “Well, it is happening and we are probably contributing to it, but the cost of tackling it is just too great—it’s punitive—and, by the way, it’s great because we might get a bit of wine in the UK”—that is, better wine; we already get some wine here.

I do not doubt that the challenge that we face is colossal, but action is well within our reach, and we now more or less know exactly what we need to do. The IPCC report, which has already been mentioned, lays it out pretty starkly. Almost the most alarming part of that report is the difference, according to the world’s leading climate scientists, between the effects of keeping the rise in warming to a maximum of 1.5°C, and keeping it to 2°C. They tell us that that half-degree would massively worsen the risks of floods, drought, extreme heat and, as a consequence, poverty for hundreds of millions of people. That half-degree is the difference between clear, that the world’s corals, and managing to hold on to 10% of them. The number of people exposed to water stress would be 50% lower if we kept to a rise of 1.5°C instead of 2°C. That half-degree would mean hundreds of millions fewer people, particularly in the world’s poorest countries, being at risk of climate-related destitution. A half-degree of extra warming would lead to a forecasted 10 cm of additional pressure on coastlines.

Currently, we are not heading for that apocalyptic 2°C rise; more likely, we are heading towards a 3°C rise. We will have to change profoundly so much of what we do: not only how we generate electricity, but how we use it; how we manage land; and transport, food and industry. That will require profound change, and investment on the part of Governments, individuals and businesses.

We can be proud that the UK helped to make the Paris agreement more ambitious, and of the cross-party Climate Change Act 2008, which set the target of an 80% cut in carbon emissions from 1990 levels by 2050. I am delighted that the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), who has responsibility for climate change, is looking at how we can go further and make net zero emissions a reality. Renewable electricity capacity in the UK has quadrupled since 2010, and we are world leaders in offshore wind.

However, given the scale of the challenge, as outlined in detail in that IPCC report, clearly we have a very, very long way to go; at the current rate of progress, we will not meet our fourth and fifth carbon budgets. Domestically, that means doing absolutely everything we can now to encourage a transition to electric vehicles, and not waiting until 2040. It means saying no to new, dirty projects, and not waiting until 2040. It means saying no to a forecasted 10 cm of additional pressure on coastlines.

Events

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possible reason we are here in Parliament is that we might have different opinions—perhaps on farming, for example—but on this issue we are all in the same boat, if I can use that terminology, and, as always, we look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say and, in particular, to her response to our questions today.

In the last few years, we have experienced a great deal of adverse winter weather, often resulting in schools having to close their doors. In fact, there is concern in some schools about the number of days that children have to take off because of adverse weather. We can all think back to our parents telling us how they walked 5 miles to school, come hail, rain or shine, but it only takes seeing a sliding school bus once to realise suddenly that there is a safety issue and that safety must come first. I know also of churches that get funding to run programmes having to continue those programmes into the summer months to meet their allocation a certain number of weeks.

The weather is certainly affecting us. In Northern Ireland—and probably here on the mainland—the first thing someone says to a person they meet in the street is, “It’s a cold one today”, or “It’s very warm.” In any conversation, that seems to be the natural introduction. We set targets, because setting targets means that everyone tries to achieve them. The councils have achieved those targets, with the co-operation of local people. Something that came up in the Westminster Hall debate yesterday on the e-petition about plastics was the education of children at a very early stage—in primary and secondary schools—to get into their minds the importance of recycling, and that is one way in which the councils have achieved the targets. Very often, it is young children who come home and say to their mum and dad, “We should be putting that in the blue bin.” There is a bit of an education programme for parents, but it also comes through the children, which is great to see.

We must do that kind of thing to help our environment, and I congratulate those who have worked so hard with these initiatives. I believe in being a good steward, and to me that means doing the best we can environmentally. Burning less coal is good for our health as well as for the environment; we need companies to step up when it comes to reducing coal use. In 2012, coal supplied two fifths of electricity: this year so far it has provided less than 6%—a massive change.

In his introduction, the hon. Member for Bristol North West referred to something about which we must express concern: the President of the United States is not as focused as many of our countries are on environmental issues. We would like to have that commitment by him and the USA. Other countries also have a responsibility. We are not pointing the finger and accusing other countries, but there is a strategy, of which they have to be a part. We look at China, the States, India and Brazil, to which the hon. Member for Richmond Park referred. In the press just last week there was a picture of Brazil from the sky showing how much of the rainforest has disappeared—an enormous amount. That cannot go on. Our incredibly fragile ecosystem, which benefits everyone, needs the rainforest to be there as the lungs of the world, yet we see large tracts of forest being decimated and put to other uses. All countries across the world have a role to play.

Other energy sources have provided well, and if we use more renewable sources we can become more self-reliant and less reliant on other nations in a changing world and economy, which can only be a good thing. I look, again, to Government initiatives. The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) is here on the Front Bench; his party, the Scottish National party, has shown a strong lead on wind turbines and has encouraged that through its own Parliament. The Government have done that as well, and we have seen some benefits in my constituency: the wind turbines there—they are probably smaller versions—have been incredibly important in getting the right mindset and providing renewable energy. We have also had a dam project. It is a smaller project, but it is enabled by Government money, and it feeds into the grid. We also have solar energy, which is another big benefit in my constituency. It is hard to envisage this, Ms Dorries, but focus on 10 acres of solar panels, with sheep grazing on the land between them—it is possible to have both things together. Farmers have diversified. We have a really good scheme just outside Carrowdore in my constituency, and a couple more up the country in Mid-Ulster and the northern part of Northern Ireland.

The Government could perhaps do more with tidal lagoons projects. In my constituency, through Queen's University and others, and some private partnership moneys, we are looking at how we can better harness the tidal movements at the narrows between Portaferry and Strangford. The power of that water is incredible, and it could provide green energy. As technology increases, we will probably be in a position to provide such energy at a lower cost. Wind turbine energy was very costly at the beginning, but the cost has dropped now and it is economical.

There was a Government initiative announced in the Budget around electric cars; that was talked about yesterday in the Chamber, in debate on the Finance Bill. Electric cars will work only if the prices are right, the cars run well and there are enough charging points, but at the moment, there is a dearth of these. It is no good if we do not regularly have charging points across high streets, villages and rural constituencies. Only then can people depend on electric cars. I was listening to a story on the radio last week about people who have dual-purpose cars—those that run on both electricity and fuel—resorting back to the fuel because charging points are not always
available. That is a real issue for the Government and, to be fair, I think that they, and others, recognise that it is something that we need to look at.

I would like quickly to refer to coastal erosion, because my constituency is subject to it. We have the very active Ards peninsula coastal erosion group, and I am very conscious of the good work that it does. The Government need to set some moneys aside—regionally, not from here centrally. There is erosion in 96 locations in the Ards peninsula. We used to refer to there being a one-in-100-years storm, but there is now one every three years.

It has taken time, but in my home county we have now bought into making changes to be more environmentally friendly, such as enforced recycling and no more free plastic bags, which has been a real success in Northern Ireland. Although the changes were difficult to begin with, we have come out better on the other side—more environmentally aware and proud of what we have achieved. That should be the goal of any environmental agenda—ensuring that people are brought in, buy in, and feel a part of changes that are good for us all in the long run.

10.8 am

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for introducing the debate so well. He is a University of Plymouth graduate, and I know that there are a lot of people back in Plymouth Labour who would want to wish him a happy birthday for today.

Climate change is real. Some 97% of scientists believe that it is happening, and it will continue to happen whether the remaining 3% agree with it or not. The extreme weather produced by climate change is becoming more and more commonplace and its impact on our lives is becoming more profound, obvious and inescapable. A report by Oxfam has shown that, between 2008 and 2016, 23.5 million people were displaced by extreme weather. If we do not wake up, that will get worse and worse. The report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West mentioned, predicted that if we do not act to stop a temperature increase of more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, on the current trajectory we will see a sea level rise from melting ice of up to 1 metre by 2100—only 80 years away. That would cause severe coastal flooding and super storms that would easily flood most major Western cities and submerge many low-lying islands, and would mean homes, roads and train lines under water.

Rising sea levels and elevated acidity mean that coastal communities such as mine in Plymouth are on the frontline of climate change and extreme weather. Far too often, more intense and more frequent storms are battering the south-west, and a lack of investment to create proper resilience—especially in our transport links—is cutting people in Plymouth off from the rest of the country. That is what I would like to speak about, because it is a good example of the challenges that we must face if we are to truly mitigate the impacts of climate change and extreme weather on our economy.

Members will know that in 2014, the Great Western rail line between Exeter and Newton Abbot was badly damaged by storms. The train line was washed away, leaving the rails hanging like a Peruvian rope bridge above the waves, and as a result, the far south-west and the rest of the country were cut off from each other. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned coastal erosion, which is most apparent from the coastline at Dawlish. I went to university in Exeter, and the place where I studied in the summer months, on the cliffs overlooking the sea, has now been washed away. Those cliffs are no longer there, and when I go past on the train every day, going back and forth to Westminster, I look at that little bit of air and remember that I used to study on it. Coastal erosion is real, and the threat it poses to our train line is apparent.

The Great Western train line was closed for two months in 2014, which affected our entire region, costing us around £1 billion in lost economic activity. It was our one and only train line—our spinal connection, our lifeline for business and leisure travel, daily journeys, holidays and investment—and its closure exposed a gaping hole in Government policy towards the far south-west. Ministers did not care enough to find the funding that we needed to make our train line resilient. As climate change brings more and more extreme weather, what is clear is that it is putting our train line at risk. Ministers have not acted quickly enough to make our train line robust, good for us all now and into the future.

I am sure that we all remember those days we were cut off from each other. The Great Western train line was closed for two months in 2014, which affected our entire region, costing us around £1 billion in lost economic activity. It was our one and only train line—our spinal connection, our lifeline for business and leisure travel, daily journeys, holidays and investment—and its closure exposed a gaping hole in Government policy towards the far south-west. Ministers did not care enough to find the funding that we needed to make our train line resilient. As climate change brings more and more extreme weather, what is clear is that it is putting our train line at risk. Ministers have not acted quickly enough to make our train line robust, good for us all now and into the future.

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The lack of investment in much of our transport infrastructure, coupled with the more commonplace extreme weather that is being caused by climate change, means that we need greater focus on, and investment in, resilience in our transport system. The Secretary of State for Transport told me in the Chamber that the work on Dawlish was his No. 1 priority, but yet again, no money for Dawlish was announced in the Budget, and it is still the case that no money has been announced by Ministers. I say to the Minister—who I appreciate is not a transport Minister—that the patience of the south-west is wearing thin. We know that we are getting more extreme weather: we can see it year in, year out, and we can see the impact that it is having on our resilience. The betrayal, the breaking of promises, the frequency of closures, the disruption, and the damage to our reputation and attractiveness as a destination are all due to the failure to invest in and secure that train line. That cannot go on. We risk more and more disruption from climate change unless Ministers stop sitting on their hands and blaming others. They must cut their money where their mouth is and fund proper, long-term resilience, particularly in Dawlish and Teignmouth.

Warnings about extreme weather can seem far distant from our shores. We sometimes look at extreme weather in far-away countries—hurricanes, tropical storms and mudslides—and think of it as happening to other people, not to us. However, the reality is that climate change and increasing extreme weather are occurring in countries far away, but also here at home. If we do not adjust the way we run our economy, invest in low-carbon technologies, and fundamentally change the way our country operates, we will see more extreme weather—not just far away but in the UK. That is something that we desperately need to avoid.

10.15 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on what is clearly a timely debate, and I wish him a happy birthday.

The hon. Gentleman would not have realised when he secured the debate that it was going to coincide with the worst wildfire to have hit California. Sadly, when I looked at the news reports this morning, the death toll had increased to 42. It is impossible to imagine what it must be like to be surrounded and engulfed by flames, and trying to flee those flames, or to be caught up in another natural disaster such as a tsunami and trying to flee the coming carnage. Those disasters are happening too often.

The hon. Gentleman detailed the other extreme events that have been happening recently: mudslides in California and Bangladesh; floods in east Africa and India; dust storms in India; heatwaves across the world, causing deaths even in the UK; typhoons; hurricanes; and extreme rainfall. He explained well that such events come at a human and a financial cost, and gave illustrative examples of the disproportionate impact that they are having on women and girls in some developing countries. It is sobering to think that 20 million people annually have to evacuate their homes and uproot their lives because of extreme weather events.

While other hon. Members also spoke about those issues, it was good that the hon. Gentleman not only highlighted the events that are happening here and now, but explained what a 4° increase would mean—Armageddon, frankly. That shows that we need to take action.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) reminded us that we are on course for a 3° increase in temperature compared with pre-industrial levels, yet the IPCC report focuses on the difference between a 1.5° increase and a 2° increase, so we need urgent action. The hon. Gentleman also highlighted the clear environmental benefits of taking action: irrespective of climate change, that action will improve the environment of the world we live in. We need to remember that, and look beyond financial costs.

No debate would be complete without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It was interesting that he highlighted his concern about the impact on education due to school closures because of extreme weather. I remember fondly when, back in my day, we had school closures because of extreme cold, or snow days. I am not sure about their impact on education, but they certainly gave us a lot of fun in the outdoors, so we took full advantage of them.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the diesel scrappage scheme, and councils leading the way in that area, but I suggest that it is the UK Government who need to lead the way. The reason we have so many diesel cars on the road is that incentives were introduced by the UK Government. Clearly, the UK Government now need to take action to get those diesel cars off the road, because people are being penalised through no fault of their own.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) both highlighted the impact of erosion on coastal communities, and the example that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport gave—the cliffs that he once studied on, which no longer exist—was certainly a stark illustration of the effects of erosion.

The hon. Gentleman also highlighted both the impact of erosion on general transport infrastructure and the closure of the great western rail line, which cut off the south-west of England. Again, that illustrates the need for action and for resilience planning, as he said.

The IPCC report effectively looks at the lesser of two evils: limiting global warming to 1.5° C versus a 2° C increase. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park touched on, a 1.5° C increase would mean global sea levels being 10 cm lower in 80 years’ time than they would be with a 2° C increase. Coral reefs would decline by only—I say “only”, but this is frightening—70% to 90%, rather than being completely wiped out by a 2° C increase. That is a stark illustration of what is going on. With a 1.5° C increase, the Arctic ocean would be free of summer ice once every 100 years, rather than once a decade.

Apart from the head-in-the-sand deniers, people know that climate change is happening. We have the proof and we can see it happening with changing weather patterns. In my lifetime, I have seen winters get milder. As I was growing up, people said, “It used to be far colder in my day,” so there is that generational change. As I was growing up, people said, “It used to be far colder in my day,” so there is that generational change. We know people’s memories might play tricks on them, but if we look at old maps of Scotland from the turn of the 20th century we can see they are littered with outdoor curling ponds. Those sites are marked on the
maps, but not one of those curling ponds exists any more. That shows the change in winter over the past 100 years or so.

Met Office statistics also back up the changes, which have accelerated in the past decade. The hottest day is on average 0.8°C warmer than for the period 1961 to 1990. Winters are an average of 1.7°C colder as compared with that same period. We now have longer spells where temperatures exceed 25°C. We have fewer ice days, longer wet spells, shorter dry spells and higher extreme wet days. It is obvious that action needs to be taken at a UK level, within the devolved Administrations and at the international level, though the international level clearly becomes more difficult with a climate change denier such as Trump in the White House. I hope his tenure is short lived.

Unlike the hon. Member for Strangford said, the UK Government need to embrace the renewables sector . As the hon. Member for Richmond Park said, we are already on track to fail to meet those carbon budgets, so strong leadership will be needed from the UK Government and we will need proper parliamentary scrutiny. As the hon. Member for Bristol North West said, we need to try to mitigate those things—there is demand to build more and more houses—by taking stock of those factors. In Scotland, any housing development of more than two houses must incorporate sustainable urban drainage systems, or SUDS. That has been the law for a number of years, yet in England SUDS are still voluntary. SUDS are a way of minimising the run-off into sewers or water courses, thereby preventing any detriment.

Going forward, we need to try to mitigate those things—there is demand to build more and more houses—by taking stock of those factors. In Scotland, any housing development of more than two houses must incorporate sustainable urban drainage systems, or SUDS. That has been the law for a number of years, yet in England SUDS are still voluntary. SUDS are a way of minimising the run-off into sewers or water courses, thereby preventing any detriment.

In Scotland—I know this from experience as well—any new development must get permission to connect to the sewer system from Scottish Water, which has the right to say no. The developer must pay for any upgrades to the sewer system or any mitigation measures that are required. That comes part of the planning conditions, yet in England the UK Government have steadfastly refused to end the right to connect. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has made that recommendation over a number of years, yet the UK Government refuse to act. I do not understand that. If we are going to mitigate the impact of future housing and climate change, we need to start looking at this.

When it comes to building houses in Scotland, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency does not allow houses to be built on flood plain land with a predicted flood frequency of less than one in 200 years. Critical infrastructure cannot be built on land with a flood frequency of less than a one in 1,000 years. In England over the years, too many houses were built on flood plains, and we are now seeing the consequences of that.

The Government must take independent advice. They cannot listen to the lobbyists from the nuclear industry and the big housebuilders, which only want to make money. We need to take control and change where we are going just now. I have made a few suggestions, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.
10.28 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on taking the initiative of writing to the Backbench Business Committee to suggest we have this debate. I congratulate him not only on persuading the Committee to allow it but on putting the case this morning that his achievement in bringing this debate reflects the non-achievement of the House as a whole in putting the issue firmly on the Floor of the House. The fact that we are debating this matter here this morning with the cream of the usual suspects indicates that we are still a very long way from getting the issue debated with the importance and urgency it deserves. I therefore fully back and support the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West that the IPCC report should have been debated fully on the Floor of the House. Indeed, the developments from that report should be debated regularly on the Floor of the House from now.

The subject of this debate is extreme weather and climate change, which has been debated in this House previously. Climate change deniers have come to theFloor here and indicated that this extreme weather stuff is nothing to do with climate change; that it is all a bit of a hoot and we should just accept the fact that the weather changes, as I think a certain President of the United States recently opined, and we should not worry too much about it. Well, I think that has been comprehensively demonstrated to be not only a completely false conclusion but an alarming and complacent conclusion, because we know what action we will have to take on climate change over the next period.

The IPCC report, as hon. Members have mentioned this morning, is not just a wake-up call but a blueprint. As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) said, if we do not tackle the speed at which temperatures are rising and how much they are rising across the world, we will inevitably face a very difficult future. The extreme weather events that we are seeing at the moment are simply a signpost of the long-term enormous effects, as the hon. Gentleman set out, on the world’s economy and the livelihoods and lives of millions of people across the planet, and on the liveability, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West set out, of large parts of the planet in future. So the extreme weather events that we increasingly see are harbingers of much wider effects in future—harbingers that we ignore at our extreme peril.

Hon. Members have drawn attention to a recent report by the Met Office on the changing nature of the climate in the UK. The report demonstrates to me that the issue is not only about hurricanes in the United States, flooding in south-east Asia or forests catching fire in northern Sweden but is very much here at home now and is the future that we will face to some considerable extent if we do nothing about it. The Met Office report is a stark reminder of how much and how rapidly things are changing. The creep of red across the map of the UK over the past 50 years shows the daily maximum temperatures of hot summer days and dry spells. Conversely, the creep of white across the country shows how icy days and daily minimum temperatures in winter change across the country; so we can see a clear change in climate.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park has rightly said, we cannot attribute particular weather events to the effects of climate change, but elementary physics teaches us that—I speak as the proud possessor of a relatively good grade in O-level physics, so I am at the elementary level—if the temperature of water increases, we do not know is happening, we are looking not at just a question of global icecaps and various other things melting that adds to sea level increases across the world; it is just the fact that water expands as it gets warmer.

As water expands as it gets warmer, the air above it is affected and becomes more turbulent. It absorbs more energy and takes up more water vapour, resulting in more precipitation, exacerbating the effects on the weather. It is not the case that climate change causes tidal surges or hurricanes in the southern United States, but it exacerbates them and changes them. They are longer in duration, more severe and more frequent, and are the consequences of the physics of climate change, as I have described.

So we know what our future holds if we do not take urgent action not only to mitigate climate change but to adapt to it. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) set out clearly what is in store for our own country’s infrastructure as a result of the changes. Indeed, I have observed the substantial effects of tidal surges and extreme tidal weather; a vital part of communication infrastructure has been severed. To a much lesser extent, I have had a small attempt in my constituency area to get much greater attention paid to flood defences for the Itchen valley. For certain, that valley will be flooded to an increasingly frequent extent as a result of tidal surges and changes.

Southampton put together a scheme for dealing with tidal surges and possible flooding. It obtained some funding through the local enterprise partnership to assist with flood relief, but the funding was then taken away on the instructions of the Government and placed into a road scheme. Unless we take the issue seriously, get our priorities right and adapt our country for what we know will be a future of far greater extreme weather events, with all the consequences that that will have on infrastructure and our daily lives, we will surely pay the price. Likewise, if we do not take seriously what the IPCC says about the global scale, we will pay the price.

I am worried about the extent to which past performance is prayed in aid for not doing as much on climate change and global warming as we might do. It is true that the UK has performed better than many other countries in taking action on climate change, but the sheer scale of the task facing us means that one country’s performance cannot be set against another’s.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park indicated that our clean growth plan is good in many ways. It has many good things in it, and includes many good responses to the requirements of the fourth and fifth carbon budgets from the Committee on Climate Change. However, the clean growth plan itself acknowledges that it will not get us to the terms of the fourth and fifth carbon budgets. Indeed, it states that it will fall short by about 5% in terms of emissions by the time of the fifth carbon budget. The failure between the fourth and fifth carbon budgets is much worse; the clean growth plan gets us only about 50% of the distance between them.

Given what we know about the difference between 1.5°C and 2°C, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park mentioned, we have to do so much more. I was
after you answer that question. I am sure that you would like to hear from the Minister and other hon. Members that the Government are seriously regarding climate change and extreme weather.

I assure him and other hon. Members that the Government respond to today’s debate, and I note his creditable (Darren Jones) on securing today’s important debate, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West on his pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries.

Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a 10.46 am responsibility to set out exactly what that action will be.

I am sure that she will agree that it deserves to be taken seriously and that action is essential. I am sure that she will agree that it deserves to be taken seriously and that action is essential.

A theme of this morning’s debate is that far more needs to be done and we have, as the IPCC report tells us, a very limited amount of time in which to get it done. We therefore need at the very least to express that urgency in the House, to ensure that the debate is shared among all Members. The urgency, effort and additional activities that are needed to combat climate change, and to adapt, must be properly brought before the whole House. As a result of this morning’s debate that call might be heard.

Alan Brown: In terms of parliamentary scrutiny, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government sent out the wrong signal when they abolished the Department of Energy and Climate Change and subsumed it into the much bigger Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, where these issues get lost among all the other stuff that the Government are looking at?

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Dr Whitehead, I am sure that you would like to hear from the Minister after you answer that question.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed, Ms Dorries; I was just about to come to my last sentence when the hon. Gentleman asked me that pertinent question, to which I will take one second to reply. Yes—when the Department of Energy and Climate Change was subsumed into BEIS that gave out a bad signal about the Government’s seriousness about these issues. Whether or not that Department is re-established, the status of climate change within Government needs to be uprated, not just in BEIS but across all Departments, in terms of what we know we need to do.

I hope that the Minister will be in concord with what has been set out in the debate, and that she will take from it the message that more effort is needed, that the urgency is real, and that we look forward to the Government grasping the issue with the seriousness that it deserves. I am sure that she will agree that it deserves to be taken seriously and that action is essential. I am sure that she will set out exactly what that action will be.

The risk in talking about extremes is that we rely on anecdotes—memorable events that might not really be part of a trend. Of course, not all extreme weather is directly because of climate change. That is why it is important to have recent, careful analysis by the Met Office, which shows that many extremes in the UK are indeed changing compared with the period 1961 to 1990. In the last 10 years we have seen higher maximum temperatures, longer warmer spells, lower minimum temperatures, and more rainfall on the wettest days. Those changes are consistent with a warming world.

The Met Office report was funded by the Government as part of our ongoing support for world-leading science. Thanks to cutting-edge research by scientists around the UK, the link between global warming and extremes is becoming clearer, even at the level of individual events. In Texas last year, the record rainfall during Hurricane Harvey led to 80 deaths and 100,000 flooded homes; researchers at Oxford University have found that human influence on the climate tripled the chance of that rainfall. To give an example closer to home, the scorching Europe-wide summer of 2003, which led to 70,000 deaths, was made twice as likely by climate change. Where we see such extremes, the Met Office makes weather warnings available to the public. Through the national risk register, we ensure co-ordinated emergency responses to possible major incidents, including flooding, storms, take those issues seriously. A Government’s first duty must be to guarantee the safety of their citizens. That is why the Government are taking steps to limit the causes of climate change and to prepare for the impacts of extreme weather.

The science is clear: our world is warming, and will warm further as emissions of greenhouse gases continue. Climate change is one of the greatest global challenges of our time, but it is a large-scale and long-term problem that it is often hard to grasp. Today’s debate touches on important points. It is often through local and immediate extremes of weather that we notice what is happening—record temperatures, droughts or downpours, or fewer, milder cold snaps. As the hon. Gentleman highlighted, around the world we have seen striking examples of extremes in recent months: the drought in Cape Town, wildfires in Alaska, and record-breaking rain over Texas from Hurricane Harvey to name just three.

In the UK we are not immune. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) identified, fresh in our minds is this year’s summer, which led to discomfort for many elderly and vulnerable people, and problems for farmers growing food. Provisional statistics from the Met Office showed it to be the joint hottest on record, together with 1976, 2003 and 2006, and one of the top 15 driest. Also, the winter floods of December 2015 and January 2016 involved the most intense rainfall at a national scale on record. Storm Desmond killed three people, contributed to severe flooding of more than 5,000 homes and businesses, and left more than 60,000 people without power in the north of England.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) on securing today’s important debate, and I wish him a happy birthday. I am pleased to respond to today’s debate, and I note his creditable concerns regarding climate change and extreme weather. I assure him and other hon. Members that the Government
low temperatures, heavy snow, heatwaves and drought. We are also working to help other countries to deal with extreme weather. We have endorsed the UN’s Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction, which sets out targets and actions to reduce existing risks and prevent new ones, including risks from climate change.

We not only have measures in place to deal with today’s risks of flooding, drought, storms and heatwaves, but are actively planning for the changing risks that the future climate will bring. Last year, colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published the second national climate change risk assessment, and this July they produced the second national adaptation programme to address the key risks that they identified. Later this month, with the Met Office, DEFRA will publish UKCP18, a new set of UK climate projections that will be a key tool to help Government, businesses and the public to make climate resilience decisions.

It is vital that we maintain our resilience to present and future weather, but that is not enough. Unless we limit climate change, we will face ever-increasing risks, some of which we cannot simply adapt to, as last month’s report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on global warming of 1.5°C made clear. My Department is therefore leading steps to cut the UK’s emissions of greenhouse gases while growing the economy. We are also encouraging other countries to do the same.

The UK was a vital player in securing the 2015 Paris agreement, which has been a game changer in bringing about a lower-carbon world. We endorsed the landmark 2015 Paris agreement, and we remain fully committed to its implementation. We disagree with the US decision to exit that agreement.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park for his speech. He is a passionate campaigner on the subject and has a long track record of raising these issues in Parliament. On international work, I should point out that we invested £3.87 billion between 2011 and 2016 in our multi-agency international climate finance programme and, as I have outlined, we have committed a further £5.6 billion. We spent £1.4 billion on adaptation projects between 2013 and 2016 and have helped 47 million people to cope with the effects of climate change since 2011. That has helped to deal with extreme weather, which is a priority for developing countries. The Government’s climate finance aims for a balance between adapting to climate change and limiting emissions. The Department for International Development leads several projects and delivery programmes to improve overall resilience to extreme weather.

On deforestation and overseas development, we support countries in taking steps to protect natural forests and make economies more sustainable. With Germany and Norway, we pledged £5 billion between 2015 and 2020 to incentivise ambitious behaviour such as Partnerships for Forest programmes, which catalyse forest-friendly businesses, creating employment in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park raised the issue of deforestation in Brazil. The UK and Brazil have a close dialogue on issues of mutual interest and concern globally and bilaterally. Brazil receives the third largest UK climate finance contribution in Latin America, the majority of which goes to forests and land use projects.

Hon. Members mentioned our influence and our work with global partners. The Government played a key role in securing the agreement of 195 countries to the landmark 2015 Paris agreement, and we remain fully committed to its implementation. We disagree with the US decision to exit that agreement.

Time is short, but let me touch on just a few other points raised by hon. Members. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park for highlighting the work of my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) as Minister for climate change. Sadly, she cannot be present to respond to the debate, but I know that she would have enjoyed the challenge. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising a wide range of topics relating to the impact on all aspects of our lives. I reassure him that climate change is part of the curriculum for young people.

I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for raising an issue relating to the trains in his constituency, which I understand must be particularly stressful for him as a constituency MP. I can tell him that the Department for Transport is working to build improvement and plan resilience, but I encourage him to engage directly with the DFT.

Finally, to touch on a point made by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), the Government take this issue very seriously. That is why
we have a Minister for climate change who attends Cabinet meetings and is heard at the highest level. Unfortunately, that is why she is not able to be present to respond to the debate.

I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions to the debate. The Government will continue to work to deliver a clean, resilient and prosperous society for all our constituents. I believe that everyone in this Chamber would agree with that.

Ms Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Mr Jones, you have less than a minute.

10.59 pm

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and the Minister for taking part in the debate.

The Minister’s response was a defence. It set out what the Government are doing but failed to admit the IPCC report’s findings: that we are not doing enough and not acting quickly enough. That admission needs to be made, on the basis of that evidence about us and other countries around the world. As my hon. Friend the shadow Minister said, we must ensure that the matter continues to be raised in the House of Commons and throughout the country. I hope that our debate this morning will raise the prominence of this vital issue and allow it to be debated on the Floor of the House in a more routine fashion in the years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered extreme weather events related to climate change.

Superfast Broadband Delivery: Somerset

11 am

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered superfast broadband delivery in Somerset.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I know the Minister is swimming in unfamiliar waters this morning, but I am very grateful to him for coming to respond to this debate.

The Connecting Devon and Somerset intervention area, or CDS, is the biggest in England, and it is connecting some of the hardest-to-reach communities in the country. CDS did not have an easy task by any stretch of the imagination, and it is important to say right at the outset that the purpose of today’s debate is not to beat up CDS for the Gigaclear contract unravelling as it has. In fact, rather than starting with criticism of CDS, I would like to pick out Matt Barrow, an employee of Devon County Council who has been working on the Connecting Devon and Somerset project since its beginning, and who has spent hours by my side in public meetings in village halls across my constituency. I know he has done it with many colleagues elsewhere in their constituencies, helping residents to understand the differences between fibre to the cabinet and fibre to the premises, the way that CDS is working and when they will get their broadband.

There is absolutely no shortage of effort or expertise at Connecting Devon and Somerset, and the organisation has all the right intentions to deliver the best possible quality broadband to the residents of Devon and Somerset as quickly as it can. The reason we have this debate this morning is that the Gigaclear contract, which was signed for the delivery of phase 2 of the state aid intervention, has not run to time. Indeed, at the very first check after only six months of its anticipated delivery, Gigaclear is already well behind and has admitted that it needs to relook at the programme for delivery.

There are three key areas for our discussion this morning. The first is the soundness of Gigaclear’s position. Can it actually deliver what it has said it can? The second is the continued case for state aid in some parts of Devon and Somerset. The market has changed over the last year or so, and commercial providers are now delivering fibre to the premises, which raises a question about the legitimacy of state aid in those circumstances. Thirdly, how can we get on with the final 5% of premises that are now awaiting connection?

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend Connecting Devon and Somerset on the biggest roll-out of rural broadband in the country. A great deal has been achieved, but it must not be forgotten that many of my constituents, and indeed those of my hon. Friend, have been ill-served. They have waited all this time, but nothing has been delivered. It has been a catalogue of incompetence and things that have arisen by the way, and many of my constituents are still not receiving broadband. The most important point in all this is that we resolve it as quickly as possible.

James Heappey: I think my hon. Friend means that nothing has come yet as a consequence of the phase 2 contract, and she is absolutely right. The phase 1 contract,
which was a fibre to the cabinet deal, is now complete in its delivery. Tens of thousands of homes and businesses in my constituency have benefited from that, and I am sure that my hon. Friend has seen the same in hers. She is absolutely right that we are more than six months into the delivery window, and it has been over a year since the contract was signed. Not one constituent of mine is a Gigaclear customer yet, and I know from my hon. Friend’s intervention that it is the same in her constituency, too.

Gigaclear’s position is what it is because they were supported by the Carillion group, which met its demise. I think it is now clear that Gigaclear has quite inexplicably failed to understand that a lot of roads in Devon and Somerset are single-track lanes, which require somewhat more endeavour to dig up and somewhat more planning around road closures—it is not possible simply to go down one side of the road or even on the verge to the left or right.

I am inclined to agree with some of the comments from the county councils. There was overconfidence on the part of senior management at Gigaclear: they were telling the Connecting Devon and Somerset leadership and our county councils that all was fine, when it was obvious that things had not progressed as they should have. In the light of that, we need to ensure that what Gigaclear now says it is capable of doing is realistic. It has already overpromised once. As it seeks to put together a remedial plan to deliver the contract, we must ensure that it is at a realistic pace, so that, crucially, our constituents can have certainty about when their broadband will arrive. The Government, the Broadband Delivery UK programme and the county councils will want to be certain about the continued financial support that Gigaclear has secured.

I will raise some issues later that make the business case slightly less sound. It needs to be tested by BDUK and CDS to ensure that Gigaclear is still the answer, especially since the market has changed and commercial delivery is happening. When Gigaclear gets to communities as part of the state aid programme, it may well find that they already have fibre—it will have already been taken up. Gigaclear might not hit its uptake targets or realise the customers that it was expecting to. Now that Gigaclear is operating in a more competitive environment than they already have. In the light of that, we need to ensure that what Gigaclear now says it is capable of doing is realistic. It has already overpromised once. As it seeks to put together a remedial plan to deliver the contract, we must ensure that it is at a realistic pace, so that, crucially, our constituents can have certainty about when their broadband will arrive. The Government, the Broadband Delivery UK programme and the county councils will want to be certain about the continued financial support that Gigaclear has secured.

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Rebecca Pow: On that point, is it not the case that the Government funding secured by Gigaclear needs to be spent by March 2020? One of the key issues is whether we could ask for an extension of the funding in order for Gigaclear to get its house back in order and to roll out the new, proposed programme that they are suggesting to us.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend is ensuring that the Minister gets the message loud and clear, because that is one of the key questions for today’s debate. The remedial plan presented by Gigaclear already runs beyond the date that the Government have said that all available money for the delivery of phase 2 will be spent. Clearly, if Gigaclear’s remedial plan is accepted, the Government will need to be willing to extend the period over which the money is spent from 2020 to 2022. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some good news on that.

Given that only 40% to 60% of properties that were due to be connected by 2020 will now be connected by that time, we might also look at whether we should offer a voucher scheme to people who now find themselves in the 50% to 60% that will not be connected, so that they can take some sort of interim measure themselves. We did exactly that for those who were going to be in phase 2 or in the final 5% when the phase 1 delivery programme was rolled out; we offered voucher schemes of £500, so that people could take interim measures within their homes.

The second issue is the ongoing case for state aid, which we have spoken about a number of times. When the delay in the Gigaclear delivery was first announced, I was straight on local TV and radio, and speaking to my local newspapers, because I was very, very cross. My expectation was that my mailbag was about to explode and that I was going to be contacted by hundreds, if not thousands, of very angry people who were concerned that the broadband they had been waiting for for years and they thought was just weeks away was actually going to be years away again.

The reality is that I have had hardly anything, and that makes me wonder why. If I go back to my former employment, there is a very important part of the military planning process. When assessing the orders to be given in order to achieve a mission, we keep asking ourselves whether the situation has changed, in order to make sure that we are not problem-solving against a situation that no longer exists. I have come to realise in the last few weeks that the reason why so many of my constituents have not been in touch with me about the Gigaclear delay is that they have sorted themselves out.

They have gone to Openreach and put in place a community fibre partnership, or they have gone to companies such as TrueSpeed or Voneus that have cell-to-build business models. Those companies go out into communities and engage, they get 30% sign-up and then draw down the money from Aviva, which underwrites the delivery of the infrastructure, and they build the fibre into those communities. When the Gigaclear contract was delayed, there was complete silence from all those communities that were flashing red on the whiteboard in my office as those which most urgently needed broadband. The reason is that the market is already providing, and has already provided, for a number of them.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a strong point and is representing his constituents extremely well. I am old enough to remember, because I was here before this started with CDS, that we were originally promised a level, as he quite rightly said, and it has not appeared. BT, slightly duplicitously, is getting in behind and setting up in villages that we were not expecting to come on. They were going to come on with Airband or Gigaclear, which is the point that my hon. Friend has made, and have actually come on behind. We should celebrate the
James Heappey: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right: the market is delivering. Whatever the business model, and whether that is cell first and build second, I now have hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of TrueSpeed, Voneus and Openreach fibre-to-the-premise customers in my constituency—a situation that has been delivered through an open-market solution, within the area that the open market review had identified as requiring state aid.

A key question for the Government today is whether state aid is even legal in areas where the market has already provided. I am not sure that we should be using taxpayers’ money to subsidise the delivery of a competitor into an area where a commercial company has already set up. TrueSpeed is underwritten by Prudential. How absurd that we would be spending taxpayers’ money to subsidise the delivery of an infrastructure underwritten by one pension scheme while another, Aviva, has underwritten the money on a commercial basis without the need for taxpayers’ intervention. As the market has changed, we need to be very clear about whether we need to go back and look at the open market review again to understand where the market is now providing.

It is certainly the case that my constituency and those of my hon. Friends the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) and for North East Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) will benefit more quickly because in some parts of Somerset we now have two entirely independent fibre-to-the-premise networks being provided. A number of communities in the district of Sedgemoor have got themselves motivated to bring in an alternative provider, such as TrueSpeed, Voneus or Openreach, and when they have fibre to the premise already, and yet their roads are now being closed and dug up with their tax money to deliver something else—causing huge inconvenience to them while it is being put in, and which they have already got. A number of communities have written to me not to criticise the delay in the Gigaclear programme but to ask, “Why on earth are you still digging up our roads and blocking off our village when we have already got ourselves sorted and we have got it? Can we not have our tax money spent on improvements to our junction or a new road or something else?”

I know that is not how it works, but it certainly underlines the case for reassessing the priorities that Gigaclear has been set by Connecting Devon and Somerset, so that Gigaclear focuses on areas where we know the market will not be able to provide over the next 24 months, rather than focusing on areas, as is the case at the moment with its early areas, that are in direct competition, particularly with TrueSpeed. I am not sure that that is the most effective spending of Government money.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) pointed out, we have been given extra money by the Government to look at further broadband improvement in rural areas. There is a real opportunity to take the money that the Government have announced—I know that the Minister will be enthusiastic to remind us of the vast sums of money that the Government have made available to Devon and Somerset—and to add it to the £5 million-plus already available in gainshare from Openreach from phase 1 of the CDS roll-out, and the substantial additional money that is still to come as part of that gainshare, and look at where that combination of funds could be used as an intervention to deliver the final 5%.

We know now, by definition, what the final 5% is, because phase 2 delivers everything but the final 5%, so surely we can deliver that final 5% concurrently rather than waiting until we have connected the 95th percentile to get on with connecting the 96th through 100th percentiles. It seems to me that the money is already available. The gainshare is coming onstream very quickly. We have a real opportunity to get the whole thing cracked in a few years by taking advantage of what the market is now providing.

In some ways, we have an embarrassment of riches, because in some parts of Somerset we now have two entirely independent fibre-to-the-premise networks being dug in on very remote rural lanes, which is a slightly absurd situation. In small communities such as Badgworth, Biddisham and Lympsham, people will soon end up being able to choose which fibre-to-the-premise provider they want to use—not the internet service provider, but actually who is going to put the fibre to their front door. I am not sure that that is actually what taxpayers’ money should be used for.

James Heappey: My hon. Friend is an excellent pacemaker—she runs slightly in front of me. I am coming to that point, but it is very helpful for the Minister to hear such things twice.

There is another part to the point about the change in the market and whether state aid is relevant. There is also the frustration that communities feel when they have got themselves motivated to bring in an alternative provider, such as Afryel, Voneus or Openreach, and when they have fibre to the premise already, and yet their roads are now being closed and dug up with their tax money to deliver something else—causing huge inconvenience to them while it is being put in, and which they have already got. A number of communities have written to me not to criticise the delay in the Gigaclear programme but to ask, “Why on earth are you still digging up our roads and blocking off our village when we have already got ourselves sorted and we have got it? Can we not have our tax money spent on improvements to our junction or a new road or something else?”

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James Heappey: That intervention perfectly underlines the final line of my speech. There is absolutely no point in spending taxpayers’ money in areas where the market is providing. There are areas of my hon. Friend’s constituency and mine, and other parts of the Devon and Somerset, where the market will definitely not provide. Let us ensure that Gigaclear’s priorities are those areas and that we do not use taxpayers’ money to compete in areas where the market is providing.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to be here. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) for securing the debate and my hon. Friends who have spoken. The debate allows me the opportunity to update hon. Members on the Government’s plans and progress towards ensuring universal high-speed broadband.

Broadband connectivity is just as, if not more, important in rural communities across the UK as in urban centres. That is why the Government and local partners are investing £1.7 billion in the superfast broadband programme, which has provided superfast coverage with speeds of more than 24 megabits per second to around 3 million premises in areas that would not otherwise have been covered by commercially funded roll-out. Coverage of homes and businesses in the UK continues to increase beyond the 95% policy objective that was achieved less than a year ago in December 2017—up from just 45% in 2010, when this Government entered office. That is a significant achievement.

At least £210 million of funding will be available to support further investment as a result of efficiency savings in the initial roll-out. High levels of take-up mean that gainshare funding from the additional profits from the network is projected to reach at least £712 million. That means a total of £922 million will be available to support further roll-out. Of that, £4.7 million will go on work that will cover areas including the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells, and that is being modelled by Openreach as we speak. He and other hon. Friends present will recognise that a substantial improvement has been achieved in their constituencies over the past few years, but that there is still more to do, which I accept.

Superfast coverage in my hon. Friend’s constituency has increased from 15.6% in 2013 to over 90%, while more than 96% of premises have speeds of 10 megabits per second or above. Connecting Devon and Somerset, or the CDS project, which is delivering across both Somerset and Devon, has to date provided superfast broadband access to over 300,000 premises that would have otherwise been left behind.

It was inevitable that reaching more rural homes and businesses would require building entirely new networks, which requires major civil engineering. Gigaclear seemed well placed to provide that following the open procurement exercise. The contracts were awarded on the basis of the supplier being financially robust enough to support the roll-out, providing the necessary broadband speeds under state aid rules, and representing good value for money for the required public investment. My hon. Friend asked a question about state aid; the short answer is that all projects begin by testing the market. We take the view that state aid is legal in an area where the market has delivered. I will write to him about that in more detail in due course.

There are a number of reasons why there has been a delay up until now. These include poor operational capacity and, frankly, poor decision making within Gigaclear linked to their supply chain management. Partly as a result of the adverse impact of the collapse of Carillion earlier this year, it has become apparent that the resources were not in place for the contracts to be managed successfully.

I recognise that communities that have not yet got the expected coverage, such as those in the beautiful rural parts of the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for Wells, for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) and for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), will feel left behind. We recognise that that is not good enough, especially when timescales extend, potentially, out to 2022.

Outline remedial plans that push delivery back to mid-2022 have been provided. Both CDS and BDUK will, however, require key reassurances regarding capacity and resources, a commitment to accelerate deployment and robust evidence that these new proposals can be delivered. We are expecting those reassurances in the coming days.

James Heappey: While I accept that the state aid is still legal, does the Minister agree that it should—at the very least—force a reassessment of the priorities that Gigaclear is given, so that the Gigaclear state aid programme complements what the market seems to be providing?

Michael Ellis: Yes, I do. The BDUK superfast programme is being delivered under a European Commission decision from 2016, which followed on from another in 2012. As my hon. Friend will know, the 2016 decision expires in 2020. Government policy is that the state aid regime will stay in place, and the Competition and Markets Authority will take on the Commission’s role in approving schemes. My Department is working closely with the CMA to ensure that BDUK can continue to deliver projects after the 2016 decision expires.

Even with this further delivery, some premises will remain without coverage. We are working hard on our commitment to ensure universal high-speed broadband of at least 10 megabits per second by 2020. We have set out the design for a legal right to high-speed broadband in secondary legislation. Ofcom’s implementation will meet the Government’s commitment to give everyone access to high-speed broadband by 2020. In the meantime, the better broadband scheme is available for any home or business with speeds below 2 megabits per second, and provides a subsidy of up to £350 for any eligible premises for satellite broadband or, where available, other solutions. The scheme has now supported almost 20,000 homes and businesses, particularly in acutely remote locations.

In the light of the findings and recommendations of the future telecoms infrastructure review, we need to move to ensure a transformation in the UK’s digital infrastructure based on fibre to the premises—or full fibre, as it is called. Despite their delay, the contracts awarded by the CDS project already adhere to this goal and overall objective. Currently only 5% of premises have a fibre-optic connection. That is not good enough.
We have a target of at least 15 million premises having a full-fibre connection by 2025 and nationwide full-fibre coverage by 2033.

That is achievable according to recent industry announcements. BT Openreach, CityFibre, Virgin Media, KCOM, Hyperoptic, Gigaclear and others all have plans for significant new fibre coverage. Fibre would, of course, make a huge difference compared with copper technology. CityFibre recently announced a £2.5 billion investment in fibre, and Openreach has announced its plans to reach 3 million premises by 2020, and 10 million by 2025 if the conditions are right.

The digital infrastructure investment fund, involving Amber Fund Management and M&G Investments, is now in place. It provides £400 million of investment capital, alongside private capital, for new expanding providers of fibre broadband. Network operators such as WightFibre and Community Fibre have already leveraged that funding. Our barrier-busting taskforce is established and tackling the barriers to fibre roll-out across the UK, and includes the production of a framework for fibre delivery to provide best practice guidance. We also introduced a five-year relief from business rates in England for new fibre infrastructure.

There is no doubt that there are challenges ahead. My hon. Friends made sound points that represent the best interests of their constituents. There is also no doubt that we are making good progress in providing rural broadband coverage. I recognise that there are issues with the remaining harder-to-reach localities. We do however need to finish the job and it is our strong intention to do that. We will also continue to push hard on full-fibre coverage, including through the project in Somerset. I welcome the continued interest and support from hon. Members ably representing their constituents—they keenly require and have a right to broadband service—as we continue to ensure we deliver our goal of a full-fibre future for the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

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Taxi and Private Hire Licensing

[Mr Hayes], who instigated the task and finish group’s review in this very Chamber some 18 months ago.

I will praise quite a few people in my speech, but the main praise must go to Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq, who has brought together a diverse range of voices from the industry and users to produce what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who instigated the task and finish group’s review in this very Chamber some 18 months ago.

I will praise quite a few people in my speech, but the main praise must go to Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq, who has brought together a diverse range of voices from the industry and users to produce what my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) has called “a superb report”. Not everyone will agree with all of it—that is partly why we are here to debate it—but we all agree on our thanks to the professor for producing it.

Let me give a couple of quotations from the report that set the scene rather well. The professor’s introduction says that he trusts “that Parliament and the Department will lead the cultural change which is necessary to ensure that passengers, workers, operators, and neighbouring authorities are treated fairly. I look forward to the Government’s prompt response to this report in order to maintain the momentum for improvement. Undue delay would risk public safety.”

If one message comes out of our debate, I hope that is it: undue delay would risk public safety.

We have only an hour and a half, so I will not go through the report line by line; that needs to be done on another day when legislation is introduced. However, perhaps there is a little to be said about how we got here, or possibly about how we did not get here. I am afraid that the Government have to take some responsibility.

In paragraph 3.7 on page 16, the professor refers to the Law Commission’s 2011 review and notes that “it is deeply regrettable that the Government has not yet responded to the report and draft bill which the Commission subsequently published in 2014. Had the Government acted sooner the concerns that led to the formation of this Group may have been avoided.” That seems to me quite a strong charge, and quite a strong point. However, we are where we are. Looking back tells us something, but we have to concentrate on looking forward. I very much hope that we will get a strong response from the Minister, whom I congratulate on his recent promotion; perhaps it was not in circumstances that he would have sought, but I commend his predecessor for her very principled decision.

Many thanks are owed to those who contributed strongly to the report, some of whom are in the Gallery today. I highlight the work of the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association, GMB, Unite the union, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, Guide Dogs, Transport for London—Helen Chapman and Val Shawcross have both spoken personally to me about the issue—and the Local Government Association. I must also praise the cross-party approach that has been taken, and I have had good help and
support from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), in promoting my private Member’s Bill.

I want to say a little about where my Bill has got to, how the report refers to it and how I hope it will go forward, and then pick up on one or two of the more controversial issues in the report that bear discussion. First, however, let me say how extraordinary the industry is and how dramatically it has changed, even since the Law Commission report—to be honest, if the Government ever finally responded to that report, I suspect that they would find it was way out of date.

We have seen huge changes in the past few years, with changing technologies and huge numbers of private hire vehicles and taxis on our streets. I do not think everyone quite realises the scale of the industry: there are now 285,400 licensed taxis and private hire vehicles and 361,500 driver licences, of which more than 137,000 are in London. The number of private hire vehicles in London has increased by 120% since 2005.

Behind the numbers, there are many different stories, and a point that I have consistently tried to make is that they are not always the same. The all-party parliamentary group on taxis, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), produced a report last year that stimulated the debate that I referred to earlier—an excellent report, but, as I said at the time, somewhat London-focused. That is not to say that London is not hugely important, but any solution that we suggest has to work not just for London, which operates under different legislation anyway, but for the rest of the country. That is part of the challenge.

Daniel Zeichner: I will come on to that point, because one of the headlines in the report is that we need consistent national standards; the question is the extent to which they can be tailored or lifted to suit appropriate local circumstances. First, however, let me say something about accessibility issues. Our London taxis have a fantastic record: all 21,000 are wheelchair-accessible, but the story is not the same across the country. I am told that in metropolitan areas outside London, 83% of taxis are wheelchair-accessible, but in some rural areas the figure falls as low as 15%. One of the challenges that we face is making our taxi and private hire fleet more accessible to people throughout the country.

There is a lot of variation in the approach to disability awareness training, which only 41% of local authorities require for taxi drivers and only 38% require for private hire vehicle drivers. Over the past few years, the percentage of local authorities that require taxi and private hire vehicle drivers to complete training on the subject of child sexual abuse or exploitation has risen to 70%, partly in response to some very sad incidents in some parts of the country. However, that leaves nearly 100 licensing authorities that still do not require drivers to undertake such training.

I became interested in the subject when I had the privilege of serving as a shadow Transport Minister for a couple of years. When I later had the opportunity to introduce a private Member’s Bill, I chose to try to do something about safety issues, on which there is cross-party consensus. Since I introduced my Bill—the Licensing of Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Bill—some 18 months ago, I have had the opportunity to discuss the issue with enforcement officers and officials from Knowsley and with taxi and private hire firms from Brighton to Manchester.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important and timely debate. The Select Committee on Transport recently visited Bristol, where we saw problems with traffic congestion, including the number of private hire vehicles from outside the city that were causing additional air pollution and congestion problems. He cited huge figures for the number of private hire vehicles—is there not an overwhelming case to cut the number outside London?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend and I had a fascinating trip to Bristol with the Transport Committee yesterday and, from that, I observe that the same kinds of issue crop up all around the country in different forms. For some years before I came to the House, and then as a constituency Member, I tried to understand the complexities of the taxi and private hire industry in my own constituency and around Cambridge. Exactly the same issues arose, with licensing standards in a city often set at one level, but many private hire vehicles came in from an adjacent area. We heard that yesterday in Bristol, where the vast majority of private hire vehicles are actually registered in South Gloucestershire, creating a conundrum for the people and local council of Bristol. That goes to the heart of one of the questions, and to the point made earlier by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), which is that of national standards.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The point that he is making is very pertinent to South Yorkshire, where we had the terrible child sexual exploitation scandal in Rotherham. As a consequence, both Rotherham and Sheffield have very high licensing standards for our taxis, with CCTV required in Rotherham. However, operators and licensed drivers from other areas can come in and completely undercut those measures, as well as all the efforts to tackle the prevalence of grooming gangs and their ability to exploit young children in South Yorkshire. I add my voice to the cross-party call for national minimum standards, which are vital to prevent such exploitation.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That was one of the issues that I spent much of my time discussing with people—trying to get that balance, with very high standards that we should rightly expect where there are specific problems, but without damaging an industry in other areas by putting undue costs and burdens on it, which could leave people in some areas with no taxi or private hire vehicle service at all. It is a challenge, yes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on the report. Equally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member...
for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), because he has done a lot of work on the matter, which I have discussed with him. At the same time, we should pay tribute to the ex-Minister, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). We have had a number of meetings and, in all fairness, as we are being cross-party, he was the man who initiated the report in the first place. He should get a lot of credit for that.

Having said that, we have a similar problem in Coventry, and there have been a number of incidents between the private hire taxis and drivers from Uber—let us be frank about that. To my way of thinking, the report should be implemented in full. People tend to forget that, originally, it was the coalition that weakened the legislation, but we are being cross-party, so I will not go too far down that road. Often, some of the drivers work 12 to 13 hours a day, just on a minimum. In fact, a documentary set in the west midlands was on a couple of weeks ago, in which someone had gone out and spent the day with a driver, who was just making ends meet. The situation is not fair on drivers, who should be given proper employment rights, like everyone else, and the zero-hours contracts should be stopped. I hope that the Minister will address that and put it right, whether it takes primary legislation or not.

In actual fact, the black cab is made in Coventry. Two years ago, everyone was paid off, but a new investor came in and the business is now thriving. But this situation threatens that, so lots of jobs are at stake as well.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Friend. It is so valuable to hear the different stories from around the country. Some years ago, I visited Coventry and talked to some of the taxi drivers represented by Unite about exactly some of the issues he raises. However, although the issues and problems are similar, they are not the same everywhere and will not require exactly the same solutions. That is the conundrum we face. Nevertheless, I pay tribute to the report, because issues such as the ones he mentioned—a complex mix, especially in relation to rewards and employment protection for drivers, which I will come on to—are part of the package.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very kind in giving way. There is a lot in the report about the influence of new technology on how the taxi fleet should operate. He might be coming on to this, but what impact does he think new technology will have on the taxi industry?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning that. I fear that were I to divert into a disclaimer on the impact of new technology it would be very lengthy. I will say only that it has clearly had a huge impact over recent years and that, as so often with new technology, the impact is mixed. The new app-based technologies have, without doubt, not only created great opportunities for some but led to difficult working conditions for others. Some people, for example, question where some of the operators pay their taxes—no pun intended—and so on. A whole range of issues have come up, and the challenge for legislators and this place is to make some attempt to keep up. That, I am afraid, is one of my criticisms of the Government. As the years have passed, the legislative void has opened more and more problems, leaving local authorities and enforcement officers with considerable problems. We have seen people out there in the real world respond quite quickly to technological change whereas, quite frankly, we seem to struggle to set the right frameworks.

Going back to the report, one of its strengths is that in a relatively short document of 30 or 35 pages it has managed, in language that most of us—and probably the wider world—can understand, to summarise a range of issues in a readily understandable way, including sections on working practices and changes in technology. I suspect that if a Committee were to take it forward, or legislation was necessary, it would probably end up being a much longer document, as the Law Commission document of some years ago was. It is, however, welcome that we have a comprehensible and comprehensive account that deals with a number of the issues. One of the key recommendations is national minimum standards, and—this is the key point, in recommendation 2—we could build on them.

My Bill looked at the other side of the coin, which is enforcement. Anyone who goes out with taxi or private hire drivers, or with enforcement teams, will pretty quickly realise that the situation is very complicated and, indeed, it is made much more so by the examples that we have referred to—drivers might be licensed somewhere else, and enforcement officers can apply rules only in their own area. To put it simply, the system is clearly not working. My Bill would have made it possible for local enforcement officers to enforce in their area against drivers from another area plying their trade. I am pleased that recommendation 9 in the report makes a similar proposal.

My Bill also suggested a national database. In the existing situation, sadly—we have seen some notorious incidents—someone can lose their licence in one area but still apply to a different authority for another. Because a local authority has no way of knowing about any previous record, it can issue another licence to a driver who, because people work out of area, can be back on the same streets where the local authority had tried to protect the public against them, sometimes within a matter of weeks. The intention of my Bill was therefore to create a national database; local authorities would record their refusals, revocations and suspensions, and any authority issuing a new licence could check that database.

That might sound like a complicated process but, through the work of the Local Government Association, such a database has been established—not at a huge cost; at a fairly minor one—and it is run by the National Anti-Fraud Network. The problem at the moment, however, is that it is voluntary, which probably means that, as so often is the case, all the people who comply and do the right things take part, whereas the ones whom we seek to catch out, or to check up on, might not. One of the recommendations in the report is that that should become mandatory.

I was extremely grateful to the Government and the Minister for supporting my Bill, and it was worked up very effectively. Sadly, as sometimes happens to private Member’s Bills, it fell foul of one or two individuals, which is a great shame, because we might well see incidents over the next few months or years that could...
have been prevented had the legislation gone through with all-party support. But we are where we are and importantly, the recommendation is in this report. The question is whether the Minister can find a way of taking it forward.

Of the 34 recommendations, many of which I think we would all agree with, I would like to comment on one or two. We have already talked about the national minimum standards. The report retains the two-tier approach to private hire vehicle and taxi licensing that sometimes has been questioned. The cross-border issue, which has already been referred to, has been one of the most controversial in recent times. It is directly affected by new technologies that make the place-based legislation that we inherited and have been using for a long time seem woefully out of date. One of the strengths of the report is that the chairman was good enough to allow members of the committee to put their comments in the appendices at the end, so we can see the differing views.

The report comes down on the side of a recommendation that was also made by the all-party group last year—that journeys should start or end in the area in which the vehicle operator and driver are licensed. There are some downsides to that; in some places that could make life a little more difficult and complicated, but on balance it seems to be the right way to go. I am sure that others wish to comment on that. Some say to me that implementing that could create great difficulties, including unnecessary driving to and from destinations; potential damage; problems for chauffeur services, particularly to airports—that is a very extensive trade, although most of us hope it may be diminished to try to improve our air quality and surface access to airports. It does not seem to be beyond the bounds of possibility to find a way through those difficulties. A close reading of some of the comments in the appendices shows perhaps a growing consensus that that basis could be achieved without necessarily causing the complete set of problems that is claimed.

The other controversial proposal, recommendation 8, is a cap on private hire vehicle numbers. Those who have followed these debates for many years will know that there was an extensive period of discussion about whether there should be a cap on hackney carriages. My city is one that has been through both, and the cap has been widely considered to be the best for everyone. The evidence in the report from Helen Chapman on behalf of Transport for London puts it very well, and my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who is no longer in his place, made reference to it, following our visit to Bristol yesterday. The congestion levels in our cities are partly attributable to the significant rise in private hire vehicles, and to other issues as well. To tackle the air quality issues, local authorities need the opportunity to consider a cap. There is not a blanket suggestion that numbers will be capped everywhere; there would have to be a public interest test and it would have to be part of a wider strategy. It seems that that, too, is the way forward.

My final general comments are on workers’ rights. The report rightly says that there are bigger, wider issues that go beyond the taxi and private hire industry. Obstruction is where most proposals from the Taylor review are controversial and contested area, and I certainly would not suggest that the issues are simple. I fear there is growing evidence that some of the rates for drivers, even using the new technologies, are being forced downwards. There is not exactly an equal balance of power for potentially vulnerable workers.

Action should be taken; I want stronger support for drivers. The suggestions made in the report are driven by passenger safety, which is very important, but it has been pointed out to me by people who work in the industry—Unite, Steve McNamara and others from the LTDA—that some of them have been tried before. Having a tachograph in a cab is different from having it in a lorry or a bus—there is much more waiting time in a cab. We will have to find other ways of dealing with that issue, rather than those suggested in the report. I agree with Steve McNamara that if drivers were better recompensed and wages were not being driven so low, there would be less incentive to work long hours. We need evidence—that may require more work—to know exactly where long hours are leading to safety issues. In the end, the overriding issue has to be safety.

I return to where I began. In the introduction I quoted, the chairman clearly says that there must not be further delay and prevarication. He says:

“Undue delay would risk public safety.”

That is a strong message. There have been too many years of delay. This is a hugely important industry for many people, especially in areas where public transport can no longer provide the kind of 24-hour service that people need to get to work and to go about their business. It is a fantastic industry, with a proud tradition and an important future. The problem is that a few people sometimes abuse the licensing system and create some of the awful incidents that there have been in some parts of the country.

We owe it to the industry, to the people working hard in it and to passengers to ensure they are safe. In this report we have an opportunity to move swiftly to implement a range of things that are not contentious and to take some decisions—as Governments ought to do—on some of the things that may be more contentious. There would be widespread support for a Government who implemented this report pretty well in full. That would make our country safer and the industry much more secure, and would offer it a vibrant future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I will call the first of the Front-Bench spokespersons at 3.30. If they keep their remarks below 10 minutes each, Mr Zeichner will be able to make some closing remarks. Four Back-Benchers wish to speak; if they keep their contributions at around eight minutes, everyone will have the chance to speak. I call Iain Duncan Smith.

2.57 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Thank you, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this debate, and I echo his congratulation to Mohammad Abdel-Haq on what is essentially a comprehensive and good report. We do not have to agree with everything in it, but I hope the Government will realise that there is much agreement across all parties on the need to drive a lot of it forward to make the changes necessary to improve taxis across the UK.
I will focus my remarks fairly narrowly on London, and particularly on the effect on black cabs of the enormous increase in the number of hire vehicles, which is mostly down to Uber. The people who have quite rightly lobbied me to ask me to be present at this debate have found that their incomes have fallen quite considerably. I want to focus on some of the issues that have arisen, and I hope that the Minister will take them on board.

Uber is massively adding to London’s congestion; the figures show that. The hon. Gentleman made a point about the increased numbers of vehicles on the road. I think a significant amount of that is down to the arrival of Uber. It is time to look at its business model. I hope we all agree that Uber does not pay its fair share towards the upkeep of the roads that it runs on, through the normal tax base. To echo his comments, whether or not people like the flexibility of its business model—I think flexibility is important, and that the gig economy opens up huge amounts of competition—there comes a moment when we must recognise that Uber drivers are treated pretty unfairly. They are scraping by in many cases and often are not very well supported by the organisation that says it does not employ them, which I always find rather bizarre, because it does the idea that somehow they are going to be incredibly successful as a direct result of this has mostly proved quite incorrect.

There is a lot of talk about how Uber got prices down, but the truth is that its model is about arriving in an area, undercutting everything else there and eventually driving people out of business, and building up a model that allows it to raise its prices. I am interested to hear that it even uses an algorithm that allows it to jack up its prices when there is demand, whereas the black cabs that it competes with are not allowed to do that. Black cabs have a fixed price set for them: they charge the same figure, regardless of whether one cannot find a taxi and it is pouring with rain. That is an area that causes great concern. Many people, in my constituency and others, who ply their trade in black cabs comment that this has led to all sorts of problems. Often, black cab drivers get complaints from passengers that they have recently been paying much more when taking an Uber, and they wonder why that is.

I recognise that the report covered much of that. The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned an area that I think we need to focus on much more. This is not just a free-for-all. After all, the scale of the increase in traffic on the roads in London is quite staggering. Notwithstanding that, the previous Mayor managed to significantly cut down various traffic lanes for reasons to do with cycling. I am sure we all want more cyclists on the road, but the reality is that as a result, in London there are more cars on slightly fewer traffic lanes.

The number of private hire vehicles has increased by more than 50%. Transport for London data shows that between 2011 and 2017 there was a 29% increase in private hire licences, taking the total to over 87,000 vehicles, which is up by 40,000 in the space of only a few years, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct; in fact, I would have liked him to have stayed on the subject for longer, because it is such an important point.

The side effect of the increase is significant, and we London MPs see it every single day. We see complaints about productivity in London being affected dramatically by the inability of vehicles to get around and make deliveries, because the scale of traffic inside the city is astonishingly large. It is a matter that the Government need to look at carefully, because of the way that the gratification of some people becomes a severe problem for others.

I am conscious of time, but I want to touch on another point as quickly as I can. I am concerned—anybody should be—that Uber’s business model, which I mentioned earlier, is alright for a short period of time when things are getting going. We want companies to get those opportunities and not be trammelled by too much tax—I am an absolute believer in that. However, when an organisation is as large as this and so dominant, there is a genuine reason why we need to look again at the business model. The figures that are most startling are that Uber paid £411,000 in corporation tax in 2016, on a turnover of £23.3 million, and that masks a number of payments. It has set itself up in Holland.

I understand about competition, but my concern is about who ultimately will pay for the roads and the condition that they are in if Uber will not. Black cabs are contributing through their tax and national insurance, as well as other private hire vehicles, many of which have been used regularly and are absolutely above board. They all have to pay through tax and through the way their company tax and regulations are applied, but Uber gets away with making next to no contribution to the state of the roads that it uses in plying its business. Uber keeps saying that it is not the one plying that trade; rather it is the drivers, who are independent, even though the drivers would not be able to ply their trade if Uber was not there. It would be a very different game.

I want to mention some constituents who have seen me about this issue: Ron Nicholson, Martin Franks, Mark Diggin, Steven Tyson and Trevor Board. They are all straightforward people who are trying to earn a living. London’s black cab system is arguably the most admired in the world. It is on all the posters, and I notice that the Ministers for Trade go out selling the idea of coming here to get black cabs. We regulate it incredibly highly. It has to have disabled access; I am incredibly proud of that fact. Unlike places such as New York, where it tends to be more of a free-for-all, we genuinely have a seriously good service, with straightforward people who want to do a good job. We regulate black cabs, yet because of the app, they are in competition with an organisation that has to do none of those things, and which has broken the point about hailing from the road. The app makes that almost ancient history. The reality is that Uber drivers are, in essence, getting passengers from the road.

We need to rethink this. We cannot have it both ways; we have to decide. Either we admire and want to continue with a service of regulated vehicles and drivers that produces an excellent service, particularly in central London, or we do not. We cannot have this unfair competition and this unlevel playing field, with higher congestion as a result.

I urge the Minister to take into consideration the consensus, among both London MPs and those who come from other constituencies and use the excellent service here. Now is the time not just to take the report into consideration and do something about the issue, but to genuinely ask the question: do we really value what we have? If we do not, we will lose it, and if we lose it, we will end up in an absolute free-for-all.
3.7 pm

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing the debate, and on his consistent work over the past three years in keeping these issues on the agenda, not least through his private Member’s Bill. I hope that as a result of this debate and the excellent report we are here to consider, many of the commendable measures he suggested through his Bill will finally find their way on to the statute book.

I rise to speak today as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis. This is a particularly important issue for my constituency; well over 1,000 of my constituents are either licensed London taxi drivers or private hire drivers. During its short lifespan, the all-party parliamentary group has sought to make the case for urgent and far-reaching reform of the taxi and private hire licensing architecture. As we have seen this afternoon, we have a growing and strong cross-party membership.

There are three points I want to make to the Minister. I congratulate him on his promotion in the reshuffle, and I commend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghan) for her diligent attention to these issues and for her engagement with the all-party parliamentary group.

Firstly, there is strong cross-party consensus on the need for urgent change; that is an important point to make, particularly given the current arithmetic of Parliament. I hope that Ministers will be reassured that if they bring forward legislation at the first opportunity, as I hope they will, they will find strong cross-party support for the proposals that we are discussing today.

Secondly, passenger safety and accessibility must be at the heart of the system. We have seen in two reports—the report published by the all-party parliamentary group on taxis and the excellent report we are discussing today—that clearly the current system has fallen well short of our expectations, and of the bar that we should rightly set to keep our constituents safe.

Third, we urgently need to address the working conditions of many people, particularly those working in the private hire industry. It should not be left to unions such as the GMB to drag big multinational corporations through the courts to ensure that workplace rights and protections, which have been fought for and won by working people over the best part of a century, are respected.

I thank Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq for an absolutely outstanding report. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who was an excellent Minister. We would not have the report were it not for his efforts. We welcomed his engagement as a Minister with the all-party group and we are delighted he is able to join us this afternoon to add his considerable voice and weight to the debate. To his enormous credit, Mohammed Abdel-Haq has engaged widely with others in producing the report. The quality and quantity of that engagement is reflected in the report’s strength. There will obviously be differences and competing interests, but he has succeeded in listening to everyone engaged with them properly, and coming up with a comprehensive and coherent set of reforms that will address the widespread concerns of many different parts of the taxi and private hire industry.

**Mr Jim Cunningham**: I echo my hon. Friend’s remarks about the professor, who did a considerable amount of work and produced a good report. In fact, I met him with a trade union official. I was remiss earlier in not identifying the professor as having done a hell of a lot of good work on the report.

**Wes Streeting**: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, and thank him for his consistent engagement with the all-party group, for raising the issues, and for bringing them to the attention of Ministers.

The report contains a whole package of reforms, and I strongly emphasise to Ministers and the Department that they ought to be implemented in full. We have already heard that there is clear consensus on the need for national minimum standards that apply across the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) alluded to child sexual exploitation and local issues. Of course, for very good reasons, there will always be areas where local authorities will want to enhance standards and protections, and develop appropriate local tools and solutions in order to regulate the taxi and private hire industry properly in their area, but our starting point has to be clear minimum standards. I think that point is accepted by the Department. Taking that into account, I will turn to why I think it is important to give some of the recommendations an airing, not least because persuasion might still be required.

On cross-border hire, as we have heard, local authorities in places such as Rotherham and Sheffield have had particular issues with safeguarding children and young people. Girls have been sexually assaulted and raped, and private hire vehicles have been used to carry out that dreadful exploitation and those horrendous crimes. Where local authorities have rightly responded and put in place enhanced safety standards and protections, it cannot be right that people can flout those protections simply by getting their vehicles registered in another jurisdiction. The proposal to address that, whereby any journey must either start or finish in the area where the licence is issued, is common sense and practical. It is known as the “A to B and B to A model, or ABBA for short.

The issue is not only safety. I strongly believe that some licensing authorities give out licences like sweets because they enjoy the revenue. They know that the drivers securing the licences have no intention of driving in the licensing authority area where the licence is issued, and they know that the drivers will be somebody else’s problem. That simply is not fair. It is not a sustainable position, but it is the position that we find ourselves in. The proposal to address that, whereby any journey must either start or finish in the area where the licence is issued, is common sense and practical. It is known as the A to B and B to A model, or ABBA for short.

Since we know that the Prime Minister is a big fan of ABBA, I hope that we will take on board the report’s recommendation to end the practice of cross-border hiring. It would stop local authorities thinking only of the “Money, Money, Money”. Local authorities support the proposals and the Local Government Association recognises the challenge. Lots of local authorities are victims of the practice, which is why the LGA issued the “SOS” in its briefing ahead of this debate, hoping that Ministers would take it on board; there is strong support for it, so I would not want Ministers to face their “Waterloo”. I promise that is the end of the ABBA references, but I hope Ministers will look carefully at the strong evidence for the need for change, and at the practical proposals.
It has been mentioned that licensing authorities in some parts of the country are small in scale, and some are in close proximity to each other, so there might need to be a pragmatic approach whereby drivers could operate across different licensing authorities, but we have to make it absolutely clear that that should not prevent drivers from being licensed in a number of authorities where they intend to work. Luckily, we have a London-wide licensing authority, but let us imagine for argument’s sake that we did not, and that drivers in my constituency in the London Borough of Redbridge also wanted to operate in Barking and Dagenham, Havering or Newham. They ought to be able to be licensed in those areas.

Local authorities might want to join together to create larger licensing areas. The Government ought to be permissive about such approaches, so that appropriate local solutions can be adopted, but we simply must end the wild west regulation. We must end the scope for drivers to flout important safety regulations, and end the practice of local authorities dishing out licences like sweets.

I turn to the proposal to give local authorities the power to cap the number of vehicles in their licensing area. It is important to emphasise that the proposal is for a permissive power. It certainly would not be the expectation—in fact, it would not be desirable—for every licensing authority to impose unnecessary caps, but particularly on the streets of London and in other big cities, the number of private hire vehicles has exploded beyond all reasonable proportions. The number of such vehicles in England reached record levels last year, having increased by 37% since 2011, whereas there was just a 3% increase in taxis. In London, the number of private hire vehicles jumped by 39% to 87,400, and the number of drivers increased further to 117,700.

The problem with the situation in London is that it does not benefit anybody. It does not benefit consumers, because even if they find it easier to order a private hire vehicle via an app, or to ring up a minicab office, it is no good to them if they are then stuck in heavy congestion trying to get to wherever they are going. It does not work for private hire drivers, who tell me they have seen their hourly wages go down. It is all right for a big multinational company with loads of drivers on their books, because they still rake in the revenues from the drivers’ hard work.

Companies such as Uber saturate the market, not just to drive the competition off the road, but at the expense of their own drivers. In central London, huge concentrations of Uber drivers operate in the same area, so they compete for the same number of customers. Even if, as we accept, the market for private hire in London has grown in recent years, they still compete for the same number of passengers, so what we get is a scourge of drivers driving round and round the streets of London, pumping toxic chemicals into our air and reducing our air quality. Even if those vehicles are not the most polluting, the congestion that they create on the streets of London allows the most polluting vehicles to pump more and more fumes into our air.

Those are some of the many reasons why the Mayor of London and Transport for London have requested from the Government powers to cap the number of private hire licences issued in London. I hope that is a permissive power that Ministers will consider carefully, and introduce, and I hope that they will put trust in local licensing authorities to make decisions appropriate to their areas. It does no good to keep talking about localism if we do not give local authorities the powers and tools that they need to do the job.

The third issue that needs to be addressed is the running sore of plying for hire. It is years since the Law Commission recommended that the Government introduce a statutory definition, but we have still not seen one. The situation should be clear, as the right to be available for immediate hire, and to be hailed on the street or at a taxi rank, is reserved to taxis alone. That has been a key privilege, in recognition of the fact that licensed taxis are held to higher standards, with higher hurdles to jump, and that taxis are more highly regulated than any other part of the system. However, it is increasingly clear that companies such as Uber flout the spirit of the law on plying for hire. It is time for the Government to strengthen the letter of the law, so that there can be no room for confusion or ambiguity about where we stand on the issue.

Finally, I would not expect mandatory disability equality training to be a source of controversy, but it has so far been a bit too difficult to persuade the Government of the need for reform in that area. As things stand, the Government are committed to guidance, rather than an obligation on drivers to undergo mandatory training. The problem, as we have heard from a range of disability charities, is that the experience of disabled people when using vehicles has not overall been a happy one, with the consistent service that we would expect. For example, Guide Dogs, which has a training facility in my constituency and has given evidence to the all-party parliamentary group on taxis, notes that discrimination against assistance dog owners is widespread. The worst offenders for refusing access to assistance dogs are private hire vehicle and taxi drivers. According to Guide Dogs, in a one-year period, 42% of assistance dog owners were refused by a PHV or taxi driver because of their assistance dogs. We have also heard complaints from people with a range of disabilities about their needs not being properly met. The proposal has widespread support from the Transport Committee, the Law Commission, the House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010, and the all-party parliamentary group on taxis.

I want to impress on Ministers again that the case for reform has been clearly made. The need for it is urgent; but happily for Ministers and Government business managers, as we have seen this afternoon from the contributions of Members from across the House, including former Cabinet Members and former Ministers with responsibility for this matter, there is clear cross-party support for the entire report. I hope that the Department for Transport will urgently proceed on the basis of that report.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I did not set a time limit, so I cannot really now limit the length of Members’ speeches. I shall probably be able to call only one more Member before the Front-Bench speeches. I call John Hayes.
Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Dr Johnson spoke of the virtues of travelling hopefully, but travelling hopefully depends on travelling efficiently, effectively, securely and, most of all, safely. The foreword to the excellent report before the House, by a group led by Professor Abdel-Haq, states that it was necessary “to chart a future which ensured public safety for all”.

Public safety lies at the heart of the work, and of our endeavours in debating this today.

The recommendations in the report are focused on how taxis are licensed and how that licensing is enforced and complied with. Compliance and enforcement are critical to a number of the recommendations. Recommendations 23 and 24, on the database and the exchange of information between licensing authorities to check on the bona fides of applicants, are critical. Throughout the report there is a focus on ensuring that those who apply for licences are fit and proper people, on whom the public can rely.

A second issue, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) referred, is the working conditions of drivers. It is clear to me that there is exploitation of drivers, whose working conditions are at best—I put it generously—variable, and that minimum standards are not currently being enforced. There is a need for urgent reform. I am not speaking, of course, of our black cab drivers, who are largely self-employed and determine their own working day and year, and who, as my right hon. Friend is right to say, are celebrated, worldwide, for their quality. It seems extraordinary to me that we should jeopardise that worldwide reputation for what modern economists call a disruptor. I am not a great fan of the disruption of what works. I say that what matters more is doing what matters in the interests of the public, not fixing things that ain’t broke—which largely applies to black cab drivers.

 Recommendation 33 addresses working conditions, referring to the exploitation of drivers and the need to enforce the national living wage, while recommendation 34 addresses the question of restrictions, on safety grounds, on the number of hours that private hire vehicle drivers typically drive. There are other recommendations on the proper treatment of disabled people. It is appalling that some blind people have been refused their proper entitlement to take their guide dog with them on a private hire car journey, and I am delighted that there is a recommendation on that in the report.

The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), has been remarkable in her willingness to listen, and I pay tribute to her, as well as to Professor Abdel-Haq. The cap that has been discussed by a number of Members seems to me to be localism in practice. We can hardly argue for reinforcing the role of local authorities in regulating the circumstances of private hire vehicles and taxis, and then say that they cannot make a judgment about the appropriate number of vehicles in a locality.

There is, however, something more worrying still to consider. We know that in Rotherham, Rochdale, Oxford and Newcastle taxis were a key element in allowing the widespread abuse of vulnerable young women. The use of taxis for criminal purposes is a direct consequence of a regulatory system that is simply not fit for purpose. We cannot allow that to continue and the Government would be unwise to hesitate for a moment in putting in place the changes necessary to avoid such an eventuality. That is about more than taxis. It is about public confidence, social cohesion and building communal faith in a system that works for all, as Professor Abdel-Haq has argued.

There cannot be a cherry-picking exercise. The report must be adopted in full, for there is not a single recommendation in it with which I do not agree. It would be quite wrong if the Government were to cherry-pick, and I know that the newly promoted Minister, who must be basking in the glory of his seemingly unstoppable rise up the greasy pole of politics, will be listening closely to the debate, and will want to work with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to make sure that the report is implemented speedily.

Sir David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Can I ask you to wind up? I am going to have to move on.

Mr Hayes: Let me finish by saying this, and just this: Dr Johnson, as I said, spoke of travelling hopefully, but the Government now need to focus on arrival. The destination must be implementation of this report, with legislation where necessary, as soon as possible.

3.30 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate. Like the speakers before me, I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for initiating this debate.

As we have heard, taxis are now an integral part of our lives, providing jobs and opportunities to people across the UK and enhancing transport links to our local and rural communities. The report by the task and finish group on taxi and private hire vehicle licences, which we are focusing on today, urges the UK Government to overhaul the regulatory regime for the taxi and private hire vehicle sector and has recommended minimum standards for drivers, vehicles and operators in taxi and private hire vehicle licensing.

There have been calls for the UK Government to convene a panel of regulators, passenger safety groups and operator representatives to determine what those minimum safety standards should be. It has been suggested that licensing authorities should be able to set additional, higher standards in safety and all other aspects, depending on the requirements of particular local areas, as the hon. Member for Cambridge and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) pointed out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on bringing this debate to the House for consideration. The lines between a hackney carriage, a black taxi and a private hire vehicle have become blurred; there are those who know how to play those blurry lines to their benefit and those who have paid the price, through fines and even the loss of their licence. Does the hon. Lady agree that this report gives the opportunity for regulation, and that that regulation should be across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the blurring of the boundaries. I will go on to talk about this in a wee bit more detail, so I will simply say for now that taxi licensing is devolved in
Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are pretty slight but pretty important divergences across the UK that deal with the kind of issues that he has raised.

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust’s research on taxi and private hire vehicle drivers revealed that only 46 out of 316 local authorities were able to provide it with detailed information about drivers’ criminal histories on request. Indeed, the research went on to reveal a significant number of licensed drivers with serious criminal convictions. The fact is that the “fit and proper person” test that is used for anyone applying to drive a taxi or private hire car is pretty ambiguous, and means that some local authorities are granting and renewing licences that perhaps we would not want them to.

The Local Government Association in England is creating a voluntary register, as we heard from the hon. Member for Cambridge. That, of course, is an interesting idea, but if it is voluntary, inevitably its impact in bringing about the changes that many of us would like to see will be limited. We know that the advent of smartphone apps is already having a significant impact on the way taxis and private hire cars operate, which is challenging existing businesses and regulatory models all the time. We have heard a lot about that today.

We need all and any taxi or private hire companies to comply with the existing licensing requirements set out in legislation and to ensure that all vehicles and drivers are properly licensed. We heard much about that from the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). We also need to pay attention to unfair working practices and ensure that those working in the so-called gig economy have fair, protected and decent working conditions. If work must be flexible, it should still be fair; the two are not mutually exclusive. Workers should have appropriate rights and protections, including sick pay and holiday pay. It was disappointing that the Taylor review did not quite match up to many people’s hopes in tackling the real issues facing workers in insecure employment.

As I said earlier in answer to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), of course taxi licensing is devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The licensing systems across the UK are similar, but there are important differences. One of the major differences, something that campaigners have flagged up and that has been made much of today, is cross-border hiring of private hire vehicles.

In Scotland, private hire vehicles are required to return to their licensing area to accept a booking after travelling outside that area. A private hire vehicle driver in, for example, Glasgow can accept a fare in Glasgow that takes them out of the city, but they cannot pick someone up outside the city. They must return to Glasgow to pick up another fare. I see no reason why the Minister cannot give serious consideration to the regulatory system in England.

There remains the problem of drivers illegally picking up off the streets without prior booking, which often overlaps with cross-border hiring. These so-called pirate cabbies have an impact on the livelihoods of other taxis and private hire cab drivers who follow the rules. They can also potentially put the public at risk, and I would wager that these pirate cabbies are causing problems across the entire United Kingdom—even in Scotland, where cross-border hiring is illegal.

Most particularly, I suggest it is likely to be a problem in big cities such as Glasgow, Belfast, London and Cambridge on the busiest nights of the week, especially Fridays and Saturdays. Clearly, more enforcement would help. The practice is a breach of cab licensing restrictions and invalidates car insurance. I know that in Scotland illegal taxi touting, where the illegal pick-up is often charged way over the odds for their journey, is an issue that Police Scotland are particularly interested in.

There is also the contentious issue of over-provision, about which we have heard much today. In Scotland, until fairly recently local councillors had no power to limit the number of private hires on the streets, but new legislation allows the licensing authority to refuse to grant an application for a private hire licence on the very grounds of over-provision of private hire cars in the area in which the driver plans to operate. Any assessment of over-provision must of course look at current provision, as well as the use of and demand for the service of both taxis and private hires, to ensure that demand can be fulfilled and there is fairness to all in the industry.

Local flexibility is important. It is also important that there should be a minimum number of wheelchair accessible vehicles, as the hon. Member for Cambridge pointed out. We have heard calls for CCTV licensing in cabs, but that is more controversial, because as well as cost considerations there are concerns about intrusion.

As the way we live our lives and access our leisure pursuits is increasingly reliant on technology, and as public transport can be challenging for some of our communities at certain times of the evening, taxi and private hire licensing also becomes more challenging. Our priority must be to keep the public safe, as well as to create a fair and reasonable environment for those who make their living providing this important service. Today we have heard some of those concerns and a little bit about some of the divergences and the different direction we have taken in Scotland. The concerns raised are important and require our attention; I am keen to hear what the Minister intends to do to answer them, whether he has had a look at how things operate in Scotland and whether any of those measures are perhaps things he would wish to adopt.

3.38 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate, and on the work he has been doing on the licensing of taxi and private hire vehicles. With his private Member’s Bill, he has shown more initiative than the Government to ensure that we legislate in this Parliament to require taxi and private hire vehicle licensing authorities in England to share information with other local authorities, to prevent unsuitable people from being granted licences. I should say that in our manifesto at the general election last year, the Labour party pledged that we would reform the legislation governing taxi and private hire services, introducing national standards to guarantee safety and accessibility.
I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes), who instigated the task and finish group's report, and I hope his colleagues on the Government Benches will now act on it. While we welcome the many recommendations in the report and the work of Professor Abdel-Haq, it is frustrating that the Government have so far failed to legislate during their eight years in power, despite the calls from Labour and other Opposition parties, trade unions and campaigners.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I intervene merely to put on the record the thanks that the whole country should give to Professor Abdel-Haq for leading this working party, to the working party itself, many of whom I see in the Public Gallery, and to the Minister who set it up. Even if the Government do not want to move generally, they can say that licensing authorities may act against companies such as Uber by insisting that people get the legal minimum rate for the hours that they are clocked on for work.

Matt Rodda: I share my right hon. Friend's concerns about the role of Uber in this and the need for urgent action to tackle abuses.

While we welcome the recommendations of the report, eight years in power is a long time to leave this issue and not tackle it. It is now time to move on. The Government's hands-off approach to taxis and private hire vehicles means that they have presided over a race to the bottom on quality, accessibility and, as we have heard, safety. Several serious incidents have demonstrated that taxi and private hire vehicle passengers are simply not adequately protected.

As technology and the industry have evolved, our regulation of the taxi and private hire industry has simply failed to keep pace. The industry is changing rapidly, yet the legal framework governing taxi services is almost 200 years old, while private hire services legislation dates from the mid-1970s in most of England and Wales and 1998 in London. The piecemeal evolution of the regulation of taxi and private hire services has resulted in a complex and fragmented licensing system, with services differing greatly depending on where in the country they are. There are no national standards, resulting in a very variable picture, primarily regarding quality, safety and accessibility.

One of the most significant challenges facing the taxi trade that Ministers have stalled over, but which the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge addresses, is cross-border working by private hire vehicles. There have been concerns about private hire vehicles operating outside their licensed geographical areas, as we have heard. That puts taxis at a competitive disadvantage, as unlike private hire vehicles they have to return to their licensed area after taking a fare outside their borough.

Some councils in the country hand out too many licences, clogging up the streets and worsening congestion and air quality, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) mentioned. Illegal levels of air pollution are the UK’s most severe public health crisis and cause 40,000 premature deaths each year. Despite being repeatedly dragged through the courts, the Government have refused to act, including by failing to include taxi and private hire vehicle policy as part of a wider clean air strategy, which I believe is a serious omission. Greater investment in charging infrastructure and greater support for taxi and private hire vehicle companies that wish to switch to electric fleets are also required.

However, it may be better to reduce the total amount of traffic in areas with illegal air quality, so I note with interest the task and finish group’s recommendation that the Government should legislate to allow local authorities—where there is a proven need—to cap the number of taxis and private hire vehicles that they license. That proposal could help authorities to solve challenges around congestion, air quality and parking and ensure appropriate provision of taxi and private hire services for passengers, while at the same time maintaining drivers' working conditions, which is important and which we have heard about today. I am interested in hearing the Minister’s response to this specific point.

The implications of cross-border licensing arrangements for safety are deeply worrying, as was said earlier. Local authorities are presently permitted to set their own “fit and proper” criteria for licensing. Dangerous private hire drivers are therefore able to operate even in an area with stringent safety criteria, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who no longer in her place, mentioned. That needs to be tackled. As a result, local authorities such as Rotherham and Oxford, which set strict criteria following instances of child sexual exploitation, are powerless to act.

Rather than addressing that problem, the Government's Deregulation Act 2015 permitted the subcontracting of licensing, which has made the situation worse. Enforcement by local licensing authorities is now more difficult, and passengers are stripped of their right to choose which operator they wish to travel with. The Government should include in future national minimum standards the requirement for all taxi drivers to undertake safeguarding and child sexual abuse and exploitation awareness training, which should include the positive role that drivers can play in spotting and reporting signs of abuse and neglect in vulnerable passengers.

Further, in the interests of passenger safety, the report recommended that Government standards should mandate that all vehicles be fitted with CCTV, subject to strict data protection measures. In the light of threats to passenger safety, there is indeed a strong argument for this measure. The report also found that such standards would support greater consistency in licensing, potentially reducing costs and assisting in out-of-area compliance.

What steps will the Government take to combat the problems associated with cross-border working? One obvious measure to mitigate the problem is the introduction of national standards for licensing authorities. The Labour party has repeatedly called for such standards, and I hope that the Minister will now commit to introducing them. The Government have previously stated that many of these issues should be the responsibility of licensing authorities, but issues such as disability access and safety standards should not be at the discretion of local authorities and should not vary greatly across the country.

In May 2014, the Law Commission published a report recommending wholesale reform of taxi and private hire vehicle licensing. It found that:

“The balance struck between national and local rules lacks an overarching rationale, resulting in duplication, inconsistencies and considerable difficulties in cross-border enforcement... The outdated legislative framework has become too extensive in some respects, imposing unnecessary burdens”.
The Government did not respond to the report beyond saying that they were “considering it.” Surely they should not simply ignore it. The industry has changed significantly throughout the years, and continues to do so, increasingly spurred on through technological change.

I am conscious of the time, so I will move to my closing remarks. The former Mayor of London, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), planned at one point during his tenure in City Hall to introduce a minimum five-minute wait for customers requesting a car and beginning a journey. That was motivated by concerns about the impact of Uber’s business model on London, which we heard so much about earlier. Those plans were abandoned after intense lobbying, but I think it is worth reviewing them again. The advent of smartphone apps is changing the industry and presents many clear benefits to passengers, but companies such as Uber currently enjoy unfair competitive advantages because they do not have to follow the same regulation as other businesses.

 Licensing authorities should use their existing enforcement powers to take strong action where disability access refusals are reported, to deter further cases. We welcome the recommendation that central Government and licensing authorities should level the playing field by mitigating additional costs that the trade faces where a wider social benefit is provided, such as when wheelchair accessibility or other measures are offered. We have seen real progress in London on these matters. I look forward to hearing what steps the Minister will take on the many questions I have asked him.

3.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. If I may briefly state the Government’s position, very much in the spirit of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), I would say in the first instance “Mamma Mia”—we cannot allow this to be “One Last Summer”, nor can it be “Hasta Mañana”. It is not quite “SOS”, but we cannot allow the taxi trade to say “Take A Chance On Me”. Above all, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said, it cannot be that “The Winner Takes It All.”

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing the debate on the task and finish group’s report on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing. Unfortunately, as Members will have detected, the Minister responsible for taxi and private hire vehicle policy is unable to be here; she is overseas on a ministerial visit. I shall make some general remarks and then pick up the questions and specific matters that have been touched on. In recent years, the taxi and private hire industry has experienced rapid growth and significant change brought about by innovation and the application of new technologies, which my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) has just mentioned. Those changes contributed to the announcement of the formation of the task and finish group. Hon. Members will recall that that announcement was made at a Westminster Hall debate last July by the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings.

The goal of the group was to consider issues raised about taxi and private hire vehicle licensing and their potential remedies. The group first met in September of last year, with an intention to submit a report later that year. The work that it did revealed a degree of agreement—a high degree of agreement, in many ways—but also very strongly held and disparate views on solutions. It is important to put that on the record, but I am sure that it will come as no surprise to anyone who has engaged with taxi and private hire vehicle regulation over the years.

The report was delayed, but that enabled the already well-informed group to consider the numerous submissions from organisations across the country and a wide range of stakeholders. They included those working in the trade, regulators, the police, disability organisations and trade unions, to name just a few. The longer timeframe gave the group the opportunity to question many of those organisations to learn more about their concerns and the specific matters relating to them.

As I trust colleagues will understand and as I have said already, I cannot advise them of the Government’s response to that stage, but I can reassure them that the work being done in the Department is near completion and that a Government response, setting out how we intend to reform the regulation of the sector, will be issued very shortly.

Frank Field: Will that be this year?

Jesse Norman: It really would not be appropriate for me, not least because I am not the Minister directly responsible for this area, to comment on the timing of the response, but “very shortly” are encouraging words when uttered by any Minister and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will take comfort from that.
I, too, would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani), as well as on my own behalf, to thank the chair of the task and finish group, Professor Abdel-Haq, for his work. It has been much said across the Chamber that his work has been welcomed and is well regarded for its clarity and the ingenuity with which he brought the disparate voices together. The recommendations that he made in the report may not be unanimously supported in every case, but the professor has achieved a great deal of consensus and on that he should be congratulated.

The report sets out the professor’s view of what is needed, from both central and local government, to ensure the safety of passengers and the long-term success of the sector. There are 34 recommendations, some of which focus on short-term fixes. A number need to be achieved by licensing authorities using their extensive existing powers. In the medium term, the recommendations focus on greater consistency in licensing. They call on the Government to legislate to set national minimum standards, as discussed today, and to enable effective enforcement through greater powers for enforcement officers and better sharing of information between licensing authorities.

As I have said, the Government will respond to the report very shortly, but we are already seeking to increase the consistency in licensing. Ministers will very shortly launch a consultation on safety-related statutory guidance to be issued to licensing authorities. The draft guidance has been the subject of extensive discussion and engagement, including a review by the task and finish group. The guidance represents an important first step in ensuring that all passengers will be carried by someone who has undergone rigorous checks to ensure that they are “fit and proper”, as legislation requires. That should apply regardless of where they travel and by whom the driver and vehicle are licensed—both issues have been raised here today.

Some of the recommendations made in the statutory guidance and in the task and finish group report will impose additional burdens on the trade. Although we would prefer that those measures were unnecessary, Ministers recognise that it is vital to act on the lessons from the Casey and Jay reports. It is a well-known remark and, I think, agreed by all that a single attack is too many. We must protect passengers from any driver seeking to abuse their position of trust.

The task and finish group’s remit extended beyond the vital area of safety. The way in which the sector is regulated and the welfare of those working within it have also been the subject of increasing concern and have been raised in this debate. Many of those concerns stem from the innovation and application of new technologies. The requesting of a vehicle, whether a taxi or a private hire vehicle, via an app is increasingly popular, but the fundamental difference between what private hire vehicles and taxis are permitted to do, in law at least, has not changed. There may be blurring, but the fundamental basis of it has not changed.

Taxis alone have the hard-earned right to ply for hire, and action must be taken against those who break the law in that regard. Taxis offer a premium service to passengers, providing confidence that drivers have knowledge of the local area and, in some areas, guarantees on the accessibility of vehicles—another matter raised today. Private hire vehicles provide a different range of services and, although there is a wide range of views as to the relative merits of some of the new entrants to the sector, we must not forget that many of these services are popular with the public. The Government support consumer choice and want to see both the taxi industry and the private hire vehicle industry prosper.

Local authority enforcement officers have a vital role in maintaining the differentiation and fair competition between the two sides: taxis and private hire vehicles. They also play an important role in ensuring that unlicensed, unvetted, uninsured and unsafe drivers and vehicles are prohibited from circumventing the regulations and stealing business from the legitimate trade.

The emergence of “disruptive” businesses, though the application of new technologies, has created new products and services with the potential to meet still unmet needs. There are also the risks that go with these developments, however, and concerns about their impact on the trade, and on safety. The Government are considering all things that could be done to improve safety, and the response will include that question, too. I think that it would be unfair for me to continue to say, “The response will include,” and that I should allow the hon. Member for Cambridge the chance to wind up his own debate.

3.58 pm

Daniel Zeichner: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving me the chance to wind up. I thank everyone who has contributed to a full debate. We have not been able to cover every single issue, and I want to raise a couple of things that were not touched on: the use of CCTV, and the anxieties, if we have larger licensing authorities, about potential clustering of vehicles in city centres.

I would like to finish by echoing the wise words of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). He said that he was not in favour of disruption. I think that I am more disruptive than he is, but one thing that we would not want to disrupt is things that are precious, and the most precious thing is safety. That is the theme that has come through the debate this afternoon, which is why I was pleased to hear the Minister promising action very shortly. We will keep him to that promise, because it is very important that we heed the messages coming through from this excellent report—we again thank the professor and his group for producing it—that safety is paramount and we need swift action.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Task and finish group report on taxi and private hire licensing.
Parental Leave for Parents of Premature Babies

[Mark Pritchard in the Chair]

4 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered parental leave for parents of premature babies.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. Having a premature baby is one of the most traumatic experiences that any parent can go through. Instead of the healthy baby that they longed for, traumatised parents watch their tiny baby struggling for its life inside an incubator surrounded by tubes, wires and beeping monitors. That is terrifying and it can go on for weeks or months, until the baby is well enough to go home.

By the time that they take their baby home, many parents find they have already used up an awful lot of their maternity and paternity leave, so their child suffers twice: first, from the serious health conditions and trauma of premature birth and, secondly, because mum and dad have to go back to work much earlier in the baby’s development than the parents of a baby born at full term. Losing this vital time for bonding and nurturing can hold the child back throughout its life. I met a young mum whose baby spent three months in intensive care, and all that time was taken out of her statutory maternity leave.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This is a topical subject. In the last week in Northern Ireland, six small babies have been born prematurely to parents who were not expecting to see them this soon. Those parents then have to change their plans for coming home. Common sense dictates the normal things that happen when a baby comes home, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that those parents should have the additional time to deal with their child’s acute needs, which arise from being premature, and that they should be given additional leave for that purpose? At that critical moment, they need that extra time.

Mr Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes the point extremely powerfully and I hope he has persuaded the Minister that action is needed to support these families. It is not just the baby who suffers; so do the parents. Two mums in five of premature babies suffer mental ill health because of the stress of watching their tiny baby fight just to survive. The expense of daily journeys to hospital, overnight stays in nearby accommodation and eating in cafes pushes many parents into debt.

I first raised this issue in Parliament in October 2016 on behalf of a group of fantastic campaign organisations, including Bliss and The Smallest Things, which is based in my constituency. We were delighted when the then Minister agreed to pilot a voluntary scheme for employers, drafted by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, encouraging them to offer parents of premature babies the flexibility and time they need to look after their little baby. The pilot started in November 2017 and was intended to run for a year, ending in October this year. We are now well into November, but there is still no word from the Minister on her view of how well the pilot went, or whether she agrees that legislation is needed.

Instead of action, the letter that the Minister kindly wrote to me proposes—regrettably—a further delay until next summer. The charities recently met with officials from the Department, but the officials said they had not yet worked out how to assess what impact the voluntary guidance has had. I would be grateful if the Minister explained the point of running a pilot if we do not know from the start how to assess it.

The truth is that we do not need any more pilots. The best employers are providing the flexibility that parents need, but too many others are not. Voluntary guidance will never coax employers who do not understand—or who do not want to understand—into doing what is right. These parents need the full force of the law behind them to ensure that their babies get the love and care they need.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I fully add my voice to those calling for extra parental leave for those with children born prematurely. As the hon. Gentleman says, many parents use large amounts of, or even all, their leave entitlement watching their babies develop in incubators. As the mother to a young baby, I can only begin to imagine the stress those parents must go through. Extra maternity and paternity leave is needed. Does he agree that parental leave should begin when a new-born baby is well enough to go home?

Mr Reed: I absolutely agree and I echo the hon. Lady’s sentiment. I hope the Minister will reflect those views in her comments. It seems extremely unfair that if a child is born prematurely it does not get the same time with its parents after it has reached full development phase as a child born healthy after a full-term pregnancy.

These parents need the full force of the law behind them to ensure that they have the time to give the love and care that their baby needs. The baby needs time with mum and dad at its side, fully focused on helping their little baby to survive and without the worry of losing their job or falling into debt, which has happened to far too many parents whose babies were born too soon.

The Government have delayed by two years so far, partly because they were carrying out a pilot, but that pilot has finished. Another year’s delay is not acceptable. It is hard to imagine something more precious, vulnerable or deserving of our support than a tiny premature baby fighting for its life and so small that it can fit into the palm of your hand. Does the Minister agree that these families need not more delays, but action, and that they need that action now?

4.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) on securing this important debate and thank him for his passionate speech.

I sympathise greatly with the experiences of parents of premature babies, especially those whose children spend extended periods in neonatal intensive care. I am
sure we all have personal experience of friends or constituents who have been in this situation. I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman’s point and sympathise. I assure the Chamber that this Government are committed to supporting working parents, including those of premature babies.

The UK’s system of maternity leave is one of the most generous in the world. Pregnant women and new mothers are entitled to take up to 52 weeks of leave as a day-one right and up to 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay, if they are eligible for pay. In the case of premature births, eligible fathers and partners have the flexibility to take up to two weeks of paternity leave and pay within eight weeks of the expected date of birth, rather than within eight weeks of the actual date of birth, if they wish.

Employed parents also enjoy other employment rights that enable them to take time off work following the birth of their child or agree a working pattern with their employer, which gives them the flexibility to combine work with caring for their child. Subject to meeting eligibility requirements, employed parents now have the right to request flexible working and the right to take shared parental leave and pay. Shared parental leave and pay enable eligible couples to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay. They can use the scheme to take up to six months off work together or, alternatively, stagger their leave and pay so that one of them is always at home with their newborn child. They can also have periods of leave within periods of work. Parents can use this flexibility to take time off work according to their and their baby’s needs—for example, fathers and partners might wish to take time off work when their child is born and later in the first year.

We are also undertaking a short, focused internal review of provisions for parents of premature babies. We expect to conclude that in the new year.

Kelly Tolhurst: I always have an open mind about everything, but we are conducting a review, which is being led by officials. We are looking at the impact and at what we can do. My officials are engaging with the charity—

Mr Reed: The Smallest Things.

Kelly Tolhurst: Exactly—it is in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. I hope to review what comes forward and to be able to come back. I look forward to discussing the outcomes with him at that time. My officials have already had productive and informative meetings with The Smallest Things and Bliss, and will be meeting the parents of premature babies this month.

It is important to strike the right balance between giving parents the flexibility that they need and giving their employers and co-workers the certainty that they need to plan. It will be important to canvass the views of organisations representing employers, particularly small businesses.

Mr Reed: One of the problems with premature birth is that it is difficult to plan for—the fact that it is premature means that people do not necessarily know that it will happen. I met one father who was required by his employer to go back to work the day after his baby was born prematurely. I am sure that the Minister agrees that his baby needed him more that day than his employer.

Kelly Tolhurst: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, and that is one reason we are conducting the review. We are aware, and we want to be able to assess what we can do more of and what needs to happen to support that group of individuals.

I am aware that the parents of premature babies have several issues to contend with, particularly in cases where their child is very premature. I am keen to explore what more can be done to support parents in that position. The review will inform our policy, and I hope the fact that we are undertaking it reassures the hon. Gentleman that we are far from complacent and that we are already taking steps better to understand the needs of parents and employers in this situation. As I have outlined, I look forward to discussing the review’s findings with him in due course and I will ensure that that happens.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) for their interventions on the hon. Member for Croydon North. It is good to see other hon. Members supporting the hon. Gentleman on the issue. I hope they will be able to engage further as we look at and come forward with the findings of the review that we are undertaking. We are committed to creating more flexible and supportive work environments for parents. In the last few years, we have taken important steps towards that, from introducing shared parental leave and pay to mandatory gender pay gap reporting for large employers. Although our maternity leave policies are some of the most generous in the world and can cater for a wide range of circumstances, we want to gain a better understanding of the difficulties faced by the parents of premature babies and we are already conducting that
work. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. I would be delighted to meet with him at any time to discuss it further.

Question put and agreed to.

4.15 pm

Sitting suspended.

Local Sporting Heroes

4.30 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the importance of local sporting heroes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

This debate is about recognising local heroes. We are lucky to have bags of them in Blaenau Gwent—Nye Bevan, for one—but it is those from the field of sport who I will look at today. They are people such as Sam Cross, the Olympic medallist from Brynmawr; Ashley Brace, the female super-flyweight boxing champion from Ebbw Vale; and Mark Williams, the three-time snooker world champion from Cwm.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): Is snooker a sport?

Nick Smith: We had a vote on that in the Whips Office and we all agreed that it was; I think it is. However, I will focus on one local sporting hero in particular and that is Steve Jones.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and indeed for securing such an important debate. Before he moves on, will he join me in commending Ken Jones, who is from my home town of Blaenavon in my constituency? His achievements in athletics, as an Olympic medallist of course, were outstanding, but he was also a quite outstanding rugby player, who scored the crucial try when Wales last beat New Zealand at rugby in 1953.

Nick Smith: I am very pleased to say what a brilliant athlete, rugby player, journalist and schoolteacher Ken Jones was; he was renowned across the valleys for his rugby pedigree. Today, however, I will talk about Steve Jones, from Blaenau Gwent.

The unusual thing about Steve is that he is a world-class, record-breaking athlete who hardly anyone knows about. He is one of the most successful long-distance runners ever produced in our country. Despite his multiple achievements, however, many people know little about this British athletics hero. So I will start telling them today.

Steve is a Blaenau Gwent-made and self-trained sporting hero. The son of a steelworker, he grew up in Ebbw Vale. Steve had been a cross-country runner, but it was while he was a technician with the Royal Air Force that he really began running competitively. He pulled himself up by his bootstraps and he reminds me of what Michael Parkinson has just said about George Best—namely, that while Best was the greatest player he has ever seen:

“He did not arrive as the complete player; he made himself one.”

Steve made himself the complete runner.

Training in what spare time he had, Steve began working his way up and competing, all the while serving his country full-time. After a ligament injury put his leg in a cast, Steve soldiered on, saying later:

“If anybody says I can’t do it, I end up doing it...I don’t like to be told that.”
That was an understatement. The tragic death of Steve's dad in 1978 had a major impact on his career. His dad had been extremely proud of his achievements and, after his dad's death, Steve wanted to push himself even further, and to be the best.

Steve burst into the top tier of world athletics in 1984 by completing the Chicago marathon in just over two hours, beating a reigning Olympic champion in the process. He set a British marathon record that stood for 33 years, until it was broken just this April by Sir Mo Farah.

In the years following Chicago and after receiving generous sponsorship from Reebok, Steve racked up further first-place marathon finishes in London in 1985, in New York in 1988 and in Toronto in 1992. Taken together, his achievements add up to a remarkable contribution to British athletics.

Now 63, Steve works as a running coach in Colorado, supporting athletes from across the world. In Blaenau Gwent, his legacy is seen every weekend in our local parkrun and other initiatives that Tredegar's Parc Bryn Bach Running Club uses to encourage new runners; I am a newish member of the club. It has also been leading the charge for proper recognition for Steve. A local dynamos, Lee Aherne, has launched a campaign to build a statue of Steve, which has already raised more than £2,000.

The key issue is this: we have this great man, who accomplished incredible things and inspires people to follow in his footsteps, but he is simply nowhere near as widely recognised as he should be. Steve's achievements are a great source of pride for many in Blaenau Gwent, but he is barely known outside our borough.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): On that point, as I come from Henley it will be no surprise if I mention our rowsers, many of whom are—like the hero the hon. Gentleman is talking about—not widely recognised outside the town, even though they participated in an international sport. Will he join me in celebrating the achievement of all these local heroes, particularly in attracting young people to their sport and giving them something to live for?

Nick Smith: I am very pleased to support the commendation that has just been made.

There have been other positive steps in Blaenau Gwent, such as installing plaques for some of our other sporting heroes, notably Spurs football legend Ron Burgess. Over the next few months, I will write to the Welsh Government, the Cabinet Office and Welsh Athletics to seek proper recognition of Steve's substantial contribution to sport.

However, I also want to look at one of the best ways to do justice to the record of local sporting heroes—harnessing their achievements to improve public health. Groups such as the Blaenau Gwent Sole Sisters and the Parc Bryn Bach Running Club already do a great job with the Couch to 5k programme and parkrun, which are coming on in leaps and bounds. However, I think that Steve getting the recognition he deserves would inspire even more people to participate.

What do I think the Government could do more of? First, it is important to assess the criteria for the official UK Government honours system, to make sure that people such as Steve are not overlooked. Understandably, many honours are awarded to people who have recently won a major competition, and some are awarded to athletes who are still competing, which is great. However, it is also important to recognise those who have made a sizeable contribution during their career—local heroes, whose good will keeps on giving.

Secondly, successes in local sport need to be given due credit. There is space for awards for services to sport at the devolved or local level, with a project similar to Australia's Local Sports Stars scheme, which seems to be a tremendous initiative.

Thirdly, we need to encourage links between our local sporting heroes and key public health initiatives. Local sporting heroes know the areas they come from and their communities, so they are ideally placed to continue encouraging others.

Some Welsh athletics stars came to our parkrun recently to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the NHS and they went down a storm—the response was absolutely fantastic—so I ask the Government to consider engaging local sporting heroes as part of the childhood obesity plan's local partnerships, which are in train. I will suggest a similar approach in my discussions with the Welsh Government and my own local authority.

Great sporting achievements of any era show us what is possible, whether they are Steve's marathon records, Mark Colbourne's Paralympic cycling achievements or Mike Ruddock's delivery of a grand slam as Wales rugby coach—we can all be inspired by the examples that such sports people have set—but when we see others reaching the pinnacle in any field, if they are from our home town, the thought “that could be me” strikes home a bit harder.

I hope everyone here has learnt a little more about Steve, his achievements and how he continues to make a great contribution to Blaenau Gwent, and I bet that other people here today have their own sporting heroes to celebrate. Finally, I would like to hear other suggestions on how we could build on the good work that these local sportsmen and women have done.

4.38 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who congratulated on securing this debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) said while we were gathering for this debate, a famous pub quiz question is this: which three England captains played for Scunthorpe United, the Mighty Iron, whose tie I am wearing this afternoon? Of course, the answer is Ray Clemence, Kevin Keegan and Ian Botham. I understand, Mr Pritchard, that Ian Botham played for Scunthorpe against Hereford United, not always successfully.

There are many local sporting heroes that we should celebrate—that is a very important thing to do—and I would like to talk about two of Scunthorpe's sporting heroes, from different generations and different sports: Tony Jacklin and Tai Woffinden.

Tony Jacklin, as people probably know, was the first person to hit a televised hole in one in Britain, at the 16th at Royal St George's, Sandwich. That was an achievement, but Tony achieved much more in his life as
a professional golfer. Scunthorpe born, he became the first British/European player to win on the Professional Golf Association—PGA—tour since the 1920s. He ended a 17-year British drought by lifting the British Open championship trophy at Royal Lytham & St Annes, and the following year he won the US Open. He is the only British golfer to hold both the British and the US Open.

Jacklin should also be remembered for rejuvenating the Ryder cup. We recently had a very successful Ryder cup series that would not have happened but for the inspirational leadership of Tony Jacklin, who led the European team to win the tournament in 1985, 1987 and 1989. The 1987 victory was the first ever on US soil by a European team.

Jacklin deservedly entered the world golf hall of fame in 2002, but he is perhaps one of those sporting heroes who has been overlooked in honours from his own country. In former times, people often had to wait until they were older to get their honours, but in these times they often get them fairly close to their achievements. Next year will be the 50th anniversary of that amazing sporting occasion when, in the Ryder cup, Jack Nicklaus conceded to Tony Jacklin on the 18th hole, and it would be an absolutely ideal year in which to recognise Jacklin’s massive achievement and his contribution to the world of golf and sport, and to this nation.

That is Tony Jacklin. We have the appropriately named Jacklins Approach in Scunthorpe, which is a street in Bottesford, and recently, when I was visiting my parents in Leicester, I passed Jacklin Drive, so there are street names, but it is time to recognise Jacklin’s achievement even more.

Tai Woffinden was also Scunthorpe born and, riding for the Scunthorpe Scorpions in 2006, he completed a clean sweep of conference league trophies, winning the championship, the conference trophy, the conference shield and the knockout cup. It was clear back in 2006 that Tai was someone special. Since then, in 2013, he has won the speedway grand prix to become world champion. Woffinden was the eighth British rider to become world champion, and the first since 1992 to hold the British championship and the world championship in the same year. He is also the youngest world champion in the modern-day grand prix competition.

In 2018, Tai became the first British rider to win three individual speedway world championships, and he is the current world champion. That is a fantastic achievement, in a sport that is sometimes a little overlooked but one that many people enjoy in the same way as many enjoy football, rugby—I should mention the wonderful people who play for the Greens in Scunthorpe—and, of course, golf, which is where I started, with Tony Jacklin.

The regatta has a great impact on disabled people, showing them that the river is theirs; that it belongs to everyone. There is a good deal of fun about the day. I do a bit of the commentary for the Dragon Boat Racing Association, which is something to behold, but what I want to mention is that one of the really important people in the whole regatta is Helene Raynsford.

Helene is a world-class rowing champion and also a Paralympic champion. Her involvement in the regatta means a great deal to all of us who are involved, and it sets an absolutely brilliant example to everyone of what can be achieved despite a disability. It has always been a great pleasure to welcome Helene and to participate with her during the day. I offer her up as a local sporting champion and pay tribute to the enormous role she plays.

4.46 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group for boxing, a steward of the British Boxing Board of Control and the author of “Fearless Freddie: The Life and Times of Freddie Mills”. I think that Members will, therefore, know what I am going to talk about today.

The primary focus of my speech is boxing and how it inspires people, but I first want to talk about something that is happening in my constituency at the moment. All sporting heroes, wherever they come from and whoever they are, have to start somewhere. They need facilities and coaches and, more importantly, they need inspirational people. The week before last, I joined my predecessors as MP for Islwyn, Lord Kinnock and Lord Tophig, to march with the community through Blackwood against the proposed closures of leisure centres in Pontllanfraith and Cefn Fforest. The leisure centres are well-used community facilities and resources, and 5,500 people have signed a petition to save them. I have been honoured to support the community in their campaign and they can rest assured that they have my wholehearted and continued support against the closures. I hope that when the council makes its decision it will bear in mind the voices of the people and keep the leisure centres open. We have seen in the past that once such community facilities are gone, they are gone forever.

I mentioned the all-party parliamentary group for boxing because we had a meeting this morning that was particularly pertinent to this debate. We were talking about how boxing has turned people’s lives around. Among others, we heard from the chairman of Matchroom Sport, Barry Hearn, who told us that inspirational role models are absolutely key to turning people’s lives around. We heard how Mike Tyson, the famous world heavyweight boxer, started fighting. He was in a correctional institute in New York state when Muhammad Ali came along, and watching Ali perform and say his rhymes for the children suddenly set a light off in Mike Tyson and he too wanted to be a boxer and follow in the footsteps of the greatest fighter of all time.

In Wales, we have a rich seam of boxers. People ask me, “How did you get involved in boxing? What was your interest in it?” and I often consider saying this: “It’s an old pair of worn-out dusty leather gloves that hang in my grandfather’s shed”. He was a fighter in the boxing booths, which were well known in south Wales.

4.44 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I was not going to participate in this debate, but I will do for a short moment. Each year in Henley we have something called the Regatta for the Disabled, which has been going on for the past 10 or 11 years. I have gone along and supported it every year. I will come on to the sporting hero associated with the regatta in a moment.
They came around every summer and many miners used to fight in them to get extra pennies, because the mines closed down for the last week of July and the first week of August and there was no holiday pay in those days. My grandfather was one of those miners and his family of 18 needed to look for an alternative form of income. He would put those gloves on and hit the carpet to knock the dust out for my grandmother before, even though he had been blinded many years previously in a pit accident, fighting his heroes, including Percy Jones.

Percy Jones is long forgotten. He died in 1922 and had a very sad life. He has a unique place in Wales, as Wales’s first flyweight world boxing champion, long before Jimmy Wilde who lived up the road in Tylorstown—they were the same weight but never fought. Percy Jones’s life is very pertinent, especially the week after Remembrance Day, because he served in world war one, was hit by shrapnel and lost his leg. He would not take a stretcher, in case he used up one for a less able-bodied man. That is how brave he was. When Percy went to a fundraiser in Cardiff at the age of 29 with his former coach and friend Jim Driscoll, people did not recognise him because he was so underweight. He was suffering from all the symptoms of trench disease, and he succumbed to it on Boxing Day 1922, at just 29 years of age. His story was lost to the mists of time, but the bravery he showed in the trenches was also demonstrated in the ring.

I want to mention not only Percy Jones but Jimmy Wilde, “the ghost with a hammer in his hand”, and other names that trip off the tongue. Even now, most recently and sadly in Newbridge in my constituency, we had Joe Calzaghe, undefeated over 40 fights. He has a unique bond with his father Enzo, to whom I want to pay tribute. They were a special team—a father and a son—and as Enzo said, “I went to war with my son, and I supported him.” Each of those boxers, whether Percy Jones, Jimmy Wilde, Jim Driscoll, Joe Calzaghe, or Muhammad Ali—I should not really mention Mike Tyson, given everything that happened—has an inspirational story. As we heard today in the all-party parliamentary group for boxing, when we talk about turning people’s lives around, we are mainly talking about people who have had contact with the criminal justice system, many of whom are inside. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), having been a boxing doctor and having attended meetings of the APPG in the past, knows Anthony Joshua well, and will know that he was tagged. When Anthony Joshua goes into a prison, unlike myself or many Members here, he can talk the language of those prisoners. He can share experiences with them, and may even have friends who were in that prison. He can tell those prisoners how boxing turned his life around.

The problem is that people see boxing as violence. People think that it is all about who can hit the hardest, and that the bigger man will always win. It is more technical than that; it is about tactics and thinking, and—as I think my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting will say, having been ringside a number of times—it is about discipline. It is that discipline that turns people’s lives around. As Barry Hearn said this morning, people who have been absolute devils, when they get in the boxing ring and see they are good at it, suddenly become like angels.

I have to take the Government to task, since there is so much good news showing that boxing in prisons can turn people’s life around. I cite other American boxers such as Bernard Hopkins, who lost his first fight after being released for armed robbery, and Sonny Liston, who famously fought Muhammad Ali over two fights many years ago. Both were prisoners who turned their life around. On 11 August 2018, the Ministry of Justice published Rosie Meek’s independent review of sport in youth and adult prisons. In that report, she highlighted the beneficial role that sport can play in our criminal justice system. She drew on extensive evidence from community groups and academic research to show that sport and physical activity, including boxing, can help to reduce antisocial behaviour and violence in prisons. Moreover, her research demonstrates the value of sport as rehabilitative in prison settings, specifically in relation to educational and employment opportunities. Recommendation 7 of that report urged the Ministry of Justice to

“re-consider the national martial arts/boxing policy and pilot the introduction of targeted programmes which draw on boxing exercises, qualifications and associated activities.”

Rosie Meek argued:

“Where these are offered (in some Secure Children’s Homes and Secure Training Centres), they are well received and highly valued, both as a behaviour management tool and as a vehicle through which to facilitate education, discipline and communication.”

Unfortunately, in the wake of that report—which only asked for a pilot—the Government decided not to take forward recommendation 7. In their response to the review, they stated:

“We acknowledge that there is a great deal of evidence about the way in which participation in boxing and martial arts programmes in the community can have positive outcomes for individuals, however there is currently limited evidence about how that translates into the custodial environment.”

Without the pilot, how are we going to have evidence? I say to the Government and the Minister—although I know this is not her direct responsibility—that they should think again about promoting boxing in prisons, and the discipline that it can encourage.

Boxing, like rugby, is entwined with our valleys communities, whether in Blaenau Gwent, Islwyn, Rhondda, or the other places I have mentioned. The boxing booth was a familiar sight in our communities. Boxing turned around not only the lives of people who might have been drawn into the criminal element but the lives of people such as Jimmy Wilde from Tylorstown, who might have been resigned to a life in the pits. It turned around the life of Percy Jones, and countless others such as Jim Driscoll and Tommy Farr. All of those people are now lost in the mists of time, but boxing turned around their life. Freddie Mills would not have been heard of if boxing had not come into his life at an early age; he would have remained a milkman in Bournemouth. He was a young criminal who turned his life around. The discipline of boxing, introduced first by his brother and then by the boxing booths, took him from driving around in a milk cart in Bournemouth to the Royal Albert Hall, and eventually to a media career. Those are inspirational stories, and there are countless others. I urge the Government to allow the boxing community to share them with those who have found themselves in trouble in life.
Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): We have extra time so there will be six minutes for the SNP spokesman, seven minutes for the shadow Minister, and 10 minutes for the Minister.

4.56 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I welcome the Minister to her place. She follows a Minister who advocated for sport with great passion; she will, I am sure, follow in her predecessor’s footsteps. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing today’s debate, because sport is close to my heart, having played rugby—and any other sport that I possibly could—for 17 years. He outlined that one of the main reasons for the debate was the lack of recognition given to Steve Jones, and the campaign to ensure that he gets the recognition he deserves. I wish that campaign well.

I think we all enjoyed hearing from the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) about the plethora of sporting greats that Scunthorpe has produced, notably three England captains. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), my colleague on the Select Committee on Justice, spoke about Henley and its rowing regatta. The hon. Member for—

Chris Evans: Islwyn.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Member for Islwyn for filling in the gap there. He spoke with clear passion about boxing, and about facilities and coaching. I will touch on coaching later. Of course, my constituency has its own local heroes, including Archie Gemmill, scorer of the best goal in World Cup history; Bernie Slaven; Callum Hawkins; David Hay; Paul Lambert, the Champions League winner; and great Scottish cup winners such as Frank McGarvey, Billy Abercromby, and Tony Grittini, named after Paolo Nutini.

When we talk about sporting heroes, we often talk about modern-era greats such as Andy Murray or Dame Kath Grainger, or old greats such as Denis Law or Rose Reilly. However, the positive impact of sport is felt most at the local level, thanks to the real local heroes: the coaches and volunteers who give up their time to allow all of us, old and young alike, the chance to participate and compete. Scotland has always been a sporting nation. We are proud to have a pantheon of heroes that rivals that of nations many times our size, and 2018 has been another proud year for Scottish sport. We have witnessed the emergence of a new household name to join those we have already recognised, such as the fantastic Laura Muir, who achieved a gold medal at the European athletics championships, and Duncan Scott, who was named the national lottery’s athlete of the year after exceptional performances at the Commonwealth games and the European athletics championships.

Of course, as an SNP MP, it would be remiss of me to not take the opportunity to boast about Scotland’s victories over England in rugby—I was there that glorious day—and, even more impressively and unlikely, in cricket.

Chris Evans: What about Wales?

Gavin Newlands: Wales will get its come-uppance in the six nations.

Scotland is one of the first countries in the world to publish a national action plan following the World Health Organisation’s global action plan on physical activity. Empowered by local sporting communities, the Scottish Government aim to cut physical inactivity in adults and teenagers by 15% by 2030. That will mean rigorously addressing all the factors involved, using a variety of approaches, including active travel funding, support for formal sports and informal physical activity, and targeted partnerships across the transport, education, health and planning sectors. Sport and physical activity bring massive benefits to physical and mental health. Those benefits include improved self-esteem, the learning of new skills and, most importantly, fun and the forming of new relationships. The “Active Scotland Outcomes Framework” sets an ambitious vision for a more active Scotland, and is underpinned by a commitment to equality, in recognition of the extra barriers that women and girls often face when getting involved. The Scottish Government set up the Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board and the sporting equality fund. They have also announced a £300,000 fund to be awarded to 14 projects that will work to tackle the long-standing challenge. All those actions will make Scotland a healthier and happier nation, and ensure that our sporting heroes, locally and nationally, will become more representative of our diverse population.

Sport truly does have the ability to promote wellbeing and inspire communities through the empowerment of local heroes. Scottish football is just one example of how sport can bring communities together. Scottish football was recently the focus of a UEFA study on the social return on investment in sport. Many will recognise the story that the study tells us, namely that sport has clear, acute social benefits that play out most locally. That is thanks to countless community role models who organise kickabouts, coach youth teams, and play for their local amateur or junior teams.

The report shows that the immediate economic benefits of football in Scotland total around £1.2 billion through participation alone, with nearly 800,000 people playing in some way. It also shows £667 million in savings for the Scottish NHS and a direct contribution of £212 million to the economy, creating thousands of jobs. It finds that investment in girls’ and women’s football has paid off massively, through excellent social benefits, as well as excellent results in the game itself: the women’s team have been hugely successful, qualifying for the World cup next year for the first time, and I congratulate them on that. That amazing achievement far outstrips anything that the male team has achieved in the past couple of decades.

Building a nation in which good physical and mental health is promoted and the norm for the majority of people would be difficult without our sporting role models nationally and locally, but it would be impossible without our heroes in local communities, who champion their sports and give their own time freely to enable, encourage and educate our youngsters. As I hope I have demonstrated, Scotland champions its sporting achievements, and we are well on our way to creating the next generation of sporting heroes.

5.2 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent.
(Nick Smith) for securing this important opportunity to discuss the role played by sporting heroes in our local communities.

It will surprise no one to hear that as shadow Minister for Sport, I spend a lot of time thinking about the role that sportspeople play in our daily lives and society. In the past, it might have been considered self-explanatory that “Sportspeople play sports, people come and watch said sports, and society benefits by having sports entertainment—and that is that.” Occasionally sports stars would break the mould—people such as Muhammad Ali or Billie Jean King, who challenged authority and told truth to power—but they were few and far between. If we asked someone today about the role sportspeople can play in society, I think the answer would be very different. We live in a period where sports stars are doing more than ever before to break the mould, to inspire a sense of possibility in our young people, and to educate. In America, LeBron James, an athlete at the top of his game, sets up public schools for underprivileged communities. If we asked someone today about the role sportspeople can play in society, I think the answer would be very different. We live in a period where sports stars are doing more than ever before to break the mould, to inspire a sense of possibility in our young people, and to educate. In America, LeBron James, an athlete at the top of his game, sets up public schools for underprivileged children.

Sports heroes are vital for society in general, but especially for the next generation, and it is important that we recognise that. They truly can make a path for others to follow. Representation matters. For many young people, seeing people who look like them, sound like them and grew up in their communities succeed in such high-profile arenas is inspiring. Nicola Adams, a normal young woman from Leeds, grew up to be our first woman boxing champion in Olympic history. We should think about how important it is for people to see themselves represented in these incredibly public settings—to see women of colour achieve so much. Women, particularly women of colour, are often told to stay in our lane, but to borrow the phrase of Elizabeth Uviebinené and Yomi Adegoke, Nicola showed that we should not stay in our lane; we should slay in our lane.

I firmly believe that the only limits that truly exist are the ones we put on ourselves. Sporting stars today do so much to personify that theme, especially for the local communities they represent. It is one thing for someone to see someone like them make it, but it is another thing entirely if they grew up in the same place. My constituency has a thing for over-achieving Khans—and Wenger and Natasha perform vital roles as mentors and friends to young people who might otherwise not have reliable adult role models in their life. I still box at Balham boxing club. I sit ringside as the boxing doctor during shows. I know the difference the clubs can make. We can talk about it in these rooms and go home to our wonderful, comfortable lives, but for many young people, the boxing club is the only place they can find someone to trust. They can be the only place where they can go to find solace, speak their truth and admit that they might have a mental health problem, or that they are about to join a gang. That is the case for any sporting facility, not just boxing clubs. We have to recognise the role such facilities can play.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) rightly said, boxing clubs in the heart of our communities can change lives. Sid, Clare, Winston and Natasha perform vital roles as mentors and friends to young people who might otherwise not have reliable adult role models in their life. I still box at Balham boxing club. I sit ringside as the boxing doctor during shows. I know the difference the clubs can make. We can talk about it in these rooms and go home to our wonderful, comfortable lives, but for many young people, the boxing club is the only place they can find someone to trust. They can be the only place where they can go to find solace, speak their truth and admit that they might have a mental health problem, or that they are about to join a gang. That is the case for any sporting facility, not just boxing clubs. We have to recognise the role such facilities can play.

The people in the clubs are mentors. They spot mental health issues and problems at home. They provide guidance, and they often offer a confidential conversation where there is no other. I have seen with my own eyes how young people who probably would not talk to their parents or teachers instead come to someone like Winston at Balham boxing club. These people are local sporting heroes. There are people like Phil and the team at Tooting and Mitcham football club. When their nearby rivals Dulwich Hamlet had their ground seized by greedy property developers and their entire club seemed to be hanging by a thread, Phil offered Tooting and Mitcham’s ground. Within a week, Dulwich Hamlet had agreed terms and were able to continue playing until the dispute with their property developers was resolved.

John Howell: I want to pick up on the hon. Lady’s reference to boxing clubs. I have a very poor village in my constituency that has a boxing club. It plays a fantastic role in providing some organisation for the young people who live there. The only thing one has to bear in mind is that last time I went there, I sat next to the ring, and I had to put my hand over my wine glass to stop blood from spurting into it after one boxer punched another completely on the nose.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing out the dangers of mixing sweat and blood, and of sitting ringside. He sounds like a true sporting hero himself for being there and supporting his local club, which I am sure was very grateful.

As we know from the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), this country has a rich history of sporting heroes; nowhere was that better demonstrated than at the 2012 Olympics, where Team GB had its best Olympics since 1908. That is something to be proud of. So many stars were made in that summer that it is hard to keep track of them.

We can speak all day long about the sporting heroes we hold dear, but we must also speak about the legacy that we leave behind as representatives of our communities. The proportion of over-16s playing sport for at least 30 minutes each week remains virtually unchanged since 2005. Teenagers are being taught almost 35,000 fewer hours of physical education in school. Hundreds of sports facilities close each year, and local authority...
spending in sport has been rapidly cut under this Government. Sporting heroes are important; sports facilities are vital.

I welcome the Minister to her post, and look forward to working with her in the future. I hope that she will use today’s debate as an opportunity to show in concrete terms that the Government will prioritise sport. We owe it to our sporting heroes, and to the people we represent.

5.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, responding to my first debate in my new role. I thank the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing the debate; I have no doubt that it will be the first of many in my new portfolio. I am hoping to do more actual sport now I am in this role, rather than just talking about it. Hon. Members’ contributions on local heroes have been fantastic. Even so early in my tenure as Minister, it is clear to me that sport can inspire communities to achievement and activity at every level. I am delighted that we are celebrating that this afternoon.

Let me turn to Steve Jones, who headed to Chicago back in 1984—before the opportunity to show in concrete terms that the Government will prioritise sport. A statue for Steve would be the only time he was seen standing still. I have gone to London, New York and Toronto to run, although not always in marathons. His contribution to British athletics should be celebrated in the Chamber, and I am pleased to do that. We must also remember what got Steve running—opportunities like parkrun and support for people in Tredgar getting out in trainers. We should absolutely celebrate him. Of course, people called Jones, as we heard this afternoon, are also very inspiring.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about rowing, boxing, blood, sweat and tears and being the person on the mic at the dragon boat races. This morning, I met representatives of Activity Alliance, a disability inclusion charity whose focus is getting active lives for everybody—it is doing so much work on that. I am delighted to hear about the Henley Royal Regatta. I have not been to it, and I think there is a huge opportunity there.

We heard about the Scunthorpe stars—three of them shining England captains—and the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) reminded us of the marvellous Tony Jacklin. I must confess that I was slightly distracted by the Conservative party conference this year by the hon. Gentleman will know about getting out on the field and doing the work when needed. It was great to hear about Active Scotland doing so much work focused on women’s and girls’ participation. When I was lucky enough to be asked by the Prime Minister to do this role, that was the focus that she looked to me to move forward.

It was wonderful to hear from my opposite number, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about Archie Gemmill and that wonderful moment, and Laura Muir. I have followed her as an athlete—a slip of a girl, she has achieved so much. When they are seen to be doing so well, the cold dark mornings when they put the slog in can be forgotten about. As a former Paisley rugby captain, the hon. Gentleman will know about the cold dark mornings when they put the slog in can be forgotten about. As a former Paisley rugby captain, the hon. Gentleman will know about getting out on the field and doing the work when needed. It was great to hear about Active Scotland doing so much work focused on women’s and girls’ participation. When I was lucky enough to be asked by the Prime Minister to do this role, that was the focus that she looked to me to move forward.

It would be remiss of me not to highlight the work of some amazing people across Eastleigh. The sports awards are coming up, and coaches, officials, clubs and schools always have the chance to be nominated by the beginning of February. Some great people have already done so much in the community. David Smith, a Paralympian, is now over at Swansea. He is an MBE, and he has won so much in boccia. He is the champion, and he is an Eastleigh guy. Eastleigh walking football club won the national finals. Getting involved in walking sports is a great opportunity for our local heroes to bring in people who perhaps have not seen such opportunities before to participate. At my seniors’ fair last week, Eastleigh rugby club was also looking for people to participate.

I think we do have a sporting hero here in the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent. Despite the foot injury, he could be back doing the marathon for the Hospice of the Valleys—I see a comeback on the cards. As a councillor, I had the chance to meet Tim Hutchings and set up a staggered marathon. That was an opportunity to inspire people into sport. It gives public health benefits and encouragement in terms of the challenges that we face with obesity and childhood inactivity.

Chris Evans: It would be remiss of the Minister not to mention my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who I understand was the only MP to run a faster time this year in the London marathon than he had run before. He should be congratulated on that.

Mims Davies: Runners get very affected by their times, whether fast or slow. Seconds really count, so congratulations to the hon. Member for Scunthorpe.

Nic Dakin: It would also be remiss not to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on his performance in the London marathon.
Mims Davies: That is a quick reminder that I did not start this year, but I feel a bit of competition coming on next year.

Moving on to the elite level, which I feel not at all close to, in Rio we saw the result of UK Sport’s no-compromise approach. Yesterday, I met with and spoke to Dame Katherine Grainger and heard about her plans. It was an amazing performance at Rio in 2016—366 athletes travelled to Brazil and 130 of them won Olympic medals. More recently, we had record-breaking performances at Pyeongchang. We absolutely look up to our elite stars, but if they are in our midst how wonderful that is.

Of course, we are building on that with our athlete days scheme, ensuring that our sports stars find some time, if they are funded, to inspire our children in schools and to go to local clubs to ensure that the story of how they got there becomes clear to our youngsters. Much of what our athletes do to inspire is vital. Since 2012, there have been more than 30,000 athlete volunteer days around the country.

We have heard about the power of UK Sport partnering with parkrun. Over 250 funded athletes have attended events this year, which has led to record-breaking attendance. The national lottery awards now include a new “athlete of the year” category. Seven shortlisted athletes were selected by a judging panel for their sporting achievements and their passion for sport. Swimmer Duncan Scott won the £5,000 award from the national lottery this year—congratulations to him.

All these people continue to keep our interest going. Football clubs across the country are doing more as part of their fixture calendar, and it is absolutely right that we allow this to happen at every level where there is an opportunity to engage and inspire. The Government are looking for lots of different outcomes with our sports strategy, but ultimately it is vital that we look for inspiration.

I feel that time is starting to push on, so I will move forward and talk about sports volunteers. The hon. Member for Tooting rightly mentioned the reliance on our volunteers, families and communities to do so much to inspire locally. There are 6.7 million sports volunteers at grassroots level; without them, we would not have the major events or sports opportunities that we see. Sport England is investing over £20 million between 2017 and 2021 to increase the number of volunteers and to allow meaningful volunteering experiences for everybody. Those mums, dads, supporters and coaches are absolutely vital.

We must talk about nominations for public honours and the opportunities to recognise people who do so much. Recipients of honours make a difference in their communities, and the guidance for nominating an individual for a national honour is readily available and can be found on the Government’s website—or people can come to Westminster Hall to make their bid and hope that it is heard by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

There are many ways to recognise the local sector. County sports partnerships do a great job in my own community at providing the nominations for the Eastleigh sports awards. Those are under way in many areas, and this is a way for local businesses also to get involved. The Prime Minister has the daily “points of light” award, which recognises inspirational community volunteers. In Hamble, there is an opportunity for everybody to experience sailing on one of the Wetwheels boats, which has been launched at Royal Southern yacht club in my own patch. This organisation for disabled people, which disabled yachtsman Geoff Holt has led, has allowed 3,000 people to get out on the water. That is an area where getting engaged is probably more difficult, but there is a fully accessible powerboat.

Dedicated athletes, volunteers and coaches, as well as people who wash kits or who get out and inspire, are vital to our communities at every level, and they should be celebrated. I have been delighted to contribute to the debate and will continue to use this platform to ensure that there are sporting heroes in our local communities who can continue to do so much and to be rightly recognised.

Nick Smith: This has been an interesting and really important debate, and it has been good for me to celebrate the athletic brilliance of Steve Jones. It has been interesting to hear about Scunthorpe’s Tai Woffinden and Tony Jacklin; to hear more about our south Wales heroes, Joe and Enzo Calzaghe; and to hear about Hannah Rainsford from Henley, who sounds absolutely fantastic.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) about the importance of boxing in our justice system for helping prisoners to build a new life, get out of crime and play a part in our mainstream communities. I thank him for that powerful point, which he made very well.

I hope that the key message coming from this debate is that our local sporting heroes support greater physical participation and good public health across our country, which has certainly been my takeaway from today. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) and the Minister, I want to give a very loud shout out to sporting volunteers across our country. Week in, week out—sometimes in all sorts of terrible weather—they ensure that our teams and individuals perform at their best.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the importance of local sporting heroes.

5.25 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the former steelworks site in Redcar constituency.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Mrs Moon. I pay tribute to all colleagues who are here to support this debate. The former steel site in my constituency has huge implications for the entirety of the Tees valley, so I am pleased that colleagues from both sides of the House are here to work towards the future of the site. As someone once said, we are all in this together. Regionally, locally and nationally, it is vital that everyone does their bit to ensure we build up from the devastation three years ago and get our communities back on their feet. The site is the key to the future of the Tees valley economy.

I secured this debate to draw attention to the biggest opportunity for new industry and jobs in the UK, and hopefully to send a strong message to investors around the world that the Tees valley is open for business and the Government’s full support behind it. The South Tees Development Corporation site covers almost 4,500 acres on the south bank of the river Tees. It was once the beating heart of industry, with shipyards, blast furnaces and chemical works lining its banks, and employed tens of thousands of people at its peak. On a visit to Teesside during the 19th-century boom, William Gladstone observed:

“This remarkable place, the youngest child of England’s enterprise, is an infant, but if an infant, an infant Hercules.”

Those booming, Herculean years sadly did not last forever. Although the area is still home to many successful businesses, its industrial footprint is significantly reduced and employment opportunities are much fewer. We aspire to rebirth the infant Hercules again by combining our great skills, infrastructure and our location in the north-east to build a new generation of industry and deliver growth across the Tees valley. Again, I welcome the support of colleagues from across the region. The jobs and investment that could be created in the Tees valley are of benefit to workers and businesses in every part of our area, and colleagues from all parties are lobbying hard for our region to get the support it needs.

The steelworks site—the epicentre of the devastation three years ago, from which our local economy has struggled to recover—must be seized as an opportunity to truly realise the northern powerhouse. The first mayoral development corporation outside London, led by cross-party politicians and local business, is working its socks off to realise the site’s potential. Our local master plan for creating 20,000 jobs on the site builds on interest from more than 100 global investors. Those investors and my constituents desperately need the work that I had in mind when I secured this debate.

The master plan demonstrates to the world that we have a clear vision in Teesside for the jobs we want to create. The support we have received so far from the Government, including the measures in the Budget, which I will speak about shortly, is a welcome demonstration that they have an appetite to help us deliver our vision. However, if investors are to commit to invest in Teesside, they need to know, when they head into negotiations with the development corporation, that the Government are fully behind the project. For investors to be confident that Teesside is the place to be, they need greater certainty that the development corporation is equipped with everything it needs to deliver the plan, and that the Government’s long-term financial commitment is certain. I seek those assurances from the Minister today.

First, I want to talk about some of the successes achieved by local people who have rolled up their sleeves and got on with driving our area forward. I am incredibly proud of the local teamwork to support people who lost their jobs at the steelworks, and to help many others into work. After the devastation three years ago, the community, local authorities, and local businesses, partners and politicians rallied together to put in place excellent support services. We did not just sit back, leaving the damage to smoulder.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I just want to send a message of solidarity from Lanarkshire, where Gartcosh closed in 1986 and Ravenscraig closed in 1992. Both are big scars in Scotland, and both are still empty fields. Housing is getting built, but the work promised to us is very slow. I totally agree with my hon. Friend about what we have seen at Redcar. Jobs need to come to the places that jobs were taken away from.

Anna Turley: I really appreciate my hon. Friend’s intervention. He makes his case incredibly powerfully. In so many communities around our country—in both England and Scotland—we have seen the devastation that can happen when industry declines and nothing replaces it. The site is of such fundamental importance to our local economy, and we cannot just allow it to smoulder. We cannot allow those jobs and skills to be lost. The next generation must not feel that they have to move away. We have got to accelerate the progress today.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Following what my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) has said, lots of Scots came to Teesside from Lanarkshire—my home county—to work in the steel industry. We are talking about their future too.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Teesside is proud of being somewhere that workers came to from across the country—Scotland, Durham and even the south-west of England—to build the infant Hercules. We are a proud place with people from across the country, who came together to find employment. We want to be a place that attracts people from around the country and the world.

We have used the resources locally that the Government gave us to develop business cases and our skills to drive our economic recovery in the aftermath of the closure. The SSI Task Force—a collaborative effort—has created
more than 2,000 jobs, supported 336 business start-ups and overseen the delivery of more than 17,000 training courses to support redundant SSI workers back into employment. Working with private sector partners such as MGT Teesside, award-winning employment and training hubs have ensured that local people are able to benefit from the jobs created by big new investment projects. The Grangetown training and employment hub in my constituency, jointly supported by Future Regeneration of Grangetown, the council and MGT, has already made great progress. Some 2,500 residents have been registered, 1,700 have undertaken training programmes, and 610 have been supported into work, 470 of whom were previously unemployed. A similar scheme in Skinningrove, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), has been supporting employees made redundant from the Boulby potash mine, providing access to training, jobs fairs and support for those who want to set up their own businesses.

Local people are taking up the entrepreneurial spirit and setting up on their own. Independent shops and bars are starting to fill some of the empty units on our high streets, and some are run by former steelworkers. Our high streets still need support from things such as business rates, but the energy of local people is already driving their revival. Support from the local council to improve shop fronts, bring empty buildings back into use, and improve and expand accommodation on our industrial estates is also helping.

Big investors are also showing confidence in our area, which speaks well for the potential of the SSI site. MGT is investing £650 million in its new biomass power plant at Teesport. Just down the road in Whitby, in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill), Sirius Minerals is investing $4.2 billion in its polyhalite mine, with the material transported to an processed at Wilton International in Whitby. In the same constituency of the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), has been supporting employees made redundant from the Boulby potash mine, providing access to training, jobs fairs and support for those who want to set up their own businesses.

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Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): On Teesport, does my hon. Friend agree that we need to have a serious discussion about the port’s future in respect of the idea of free ports post Brexit to generate more income for the area?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had some really positive cross-party discussions about a free port in Teesport. The potential to create jobs, attract investment and elevate the area on the global stage is huge. We have got to ensure we get it right, but there is massive potential there, Brexit or no Brexit.

I want to talk a bit about the opportunities on the SSI site. We are building on a strong foundation of public and private sector talent and on Teesside’s determination. We have the same ambitions for the steel site and a strong local team of business leaders, local authority officers and cross-party politicians, who are all working hard to deliver on those ambitions. There are many innovative projects at the site—from energy generation and materials processing to rail and renewables—and lots to get excited about. Much of the detail is protected for commercial reasons, but some of the details have been reported in the local media. Metal production could be coming back to the site, with proposals for an aluminium cast-house facility. A £5 billion energy plant focused on clean gas is also in the pipeline, and will potentially create thousands of jobs.

I secured this debate not simply to congratulate everyone and say that everything is marvellous. I am afraid it is not. I am already aware of two big investments that will now go elsewhere, attracted by better support. The first is by the chemicals company INEOS, which was looking to Teesside as the location for its new 4x4 manufacturing plant for Projekt Grenadier. That £600 million investment could have created more than 1,000 new jobs. The South Tees site and a location in Germany were shortlisted, but it was announced just over a week ago that the company may now look to Wales instead. That is a big lost opportunity for the regeneration of the development corporation site and for jobs on Teesside. The car industry is one of our region’s key strengths—the supply chain is well developed and we have a great skilled workforce.

The other lost investment I am aware of is by a major steel company with significant UK operations, which was looking to develop an electric arc furnace on Teesside, building on the excellent research into electric steelmaking by the Materials Processing Institute in South Bank. That would have returned primary steelmaking to Teeside, continuing our long and proud history of doing that. Instead, the company is now looking at a more attractive offer from the devolved Government in Scotland.

We must ask why those companies made those decisions. I believe the Government could have given them more certainty and financial support. I highlight those incidents not to spread doom and gloom—I know how important it is to talk up the area—but we need to recognise what is at stake if we cannot secure the confidence of those who are looking to invest.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The hon. Lady is absolutely right that it is disappointing that the Land Rover Defender plant will not come to Teesside, but does she recognise that the site that has been allocated is an existing Ford automotive plant where there are a lot of skills? No doubt it was that, rather than the fact that the Government were not prepared to support Teesside, that tipped the balance.

Anna Turley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but that just demonstrates the urgency of the need to sort the site out and get it ready. We just cannot compete with other sites if we still do not own the site and it needs huge investment to get it ready. That is why this debate is so urgent. Brilliant companies are investing in our area. I have mentioned Sirius’s £4.2 billion project. At full production, that will have the ability to increase the size of the Tees valley economy by 18%, and some 800 people are already working on the site. However, to reach its full potential, that project, like others I have mentioned, will require a Treasury guarantee to match commercially raised funds.
I sincerely hope that the Government back up our local ambitions with the finance necessary to support that project and others, and that they avoid their natural inclination to be risk averse when it comes to backing such major projects. I urge them to believe in us in the Tees valley and in the companies that want to invest in great projects there. I am raising a warning flag. The Government must pull their weight and put the required money behind those bids, or we will continue to lose out to devolved or other nations.

The biggest barrier to realising our ambitions is the ownership of the charge on the former SSI land, which remains with the Thai banks. That is holding back progress. Negotiations with those banks are ongoing following the signature of a memorandum of understanding between the banks and the development corporation in May. That was due to expire at the end of October, but I understand it has been extended until early next year, although no press release was issued to acknowledge that. The local team is working hard, supported by funding from the local councils, to conclude a deal for the SSI land and for land owned by others, such as Tata. It is hindered in those efforts by premature announcements of multi-million pound investments that are some way off. Such announcements put at risk the chance of securing an affordable, locally negotiated deal, and risk raising local expectations. Of course, we have compulsory purchase as a backstop should those efforts fail. That process has started—landowners know they will receive nothing for the land should a deal fail.

As a first step, we need the Government to do everything in their power to support ongoing negotiations and ensure that they result in a successful agreement at the earliest opportunity. If that involves providing funding to seal the deal, that option must be on the table. Failure to gain ownership of the land and assets is holding everything back, and Ministers need to go beyond ad hoc funding commitments to provide confidence that long-term support will be forthcoming.

That brings me to funding. Before the Budget, the development corporation had just £5 million to progress regeneration work, which is not enough to get the land ready. Given the complexity of the industrial assets involved and the huge amount of work that needs to be done to clean up the site, that will cost an awful lot of money—£5 million will not stretch far. Although the management funding of £118 million in last year’s Budget was welcome, it was just keep-safe money that would otherwise have been received by the development corporation and the borough council according to a formula that is still to be agreed.

I was concerned that that change would mean taking money that would otherwise have been received by Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, placing the cost on local people and public services. However, answers to written questions I tabled following the Budget reassure me that that will not be the case. All business rates growth over and above the current baseline will be retained locally and shared between the development corporation and the borough council according to a formula that is still to be agreed.

Although it makes sense that the private sector should help to fund the ongoing development of the site, I am concerned that progress will be extremely slow if that is the main source of funding for regeneration. That mechanism will begin to pay off only when new industries are established, and as we do not yet own the land, that is some time away. We would like reassurance from Ministers that that will not be the limit of central Government’s contribution to the clean-up of the site, not including their long-term legal responsibility to keep the site safe.

I recognise that the Budget also included £14 million to support short-term measures to help unlock two projects on the most shovel-ready land, which is currently owned by Tata. That is obviously welcome, but in the grand scheme of things it is a very limited measure when compared with the many millions that will be needed not only to prepare land but to provide crucial infrastructure.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is really important that we clarify that that £14 million is instrumental to ensuring that those two sites are available for two metals projects that will create 1,500 jobs. Although in isolation those projects represent small parts of sites, they are viable and ready to roll, and they will create real jobs in a very short period of time.

Anna Turley: Absolutely. It is great to see those projects, but three years on we are still waiting for one job to be created. I cannot wait for those jobs to be developed. I welcome the £14 million in the Budget—that is positive—but we want more, and we want the pace to be quicker. That £14 million is not sufficient to undo the damage to the local economy, which lost 3,000 jobs, with the average salary declining by £10,000. The impact of that is not sustainable. We need jobs as quickly as possible. I welcome that start, but we must accelerate.

The £14 million also depends on a successful business case being presented to the Government and on businesses being prepared to invest. I have warned about lost projects for exactly that reason: there is no guarantee that interest will turn into real investment if there is not confidence in the site.

One of our biggest warnings when the steelworks closed was that the longer-term cost of managing and regenerating the site would far exceed the limited funding needed to mothball the blast furnace and keep the coke ovens alive. Given that the Government decided not to do that, despite their offering to step in to save Port Talbot a few months later, the onus remains on them to pick up the tab for the consequences. There can be no backing out. I wrote at the time to the Secretary of State: “Any attempt by the Government to divest itself of this responsibility, without a proper jointly developed strategy, would be challenged.”
That is therefore what people would expect me to do should I begin to have concerns. I also remind everyone that, after his appointment as Government investment tsar for the Tees valley, Michael Heseltine said:

"The money to clean up the site will be what it costs. No-one knows what the condition of the site is and although there have been estimates, they are estimates based on guess work. So it is much better to make it clear, central government will pay the clean-up costs and underwrite them whatever the bill comes to."

As we head to the comprehensive spending review in the spring, my constituents and I am looking to the Government to provide the guarantees we need that sufficient funding will be made available to help realise our ambitions. The site is and will remain a high-risk proposition for new investors until the Government confirm that they will provide the financial backing they promised in 2015. That would mean the STDC being able to purchase the land, start real investment in infrastructure, as set out in the masterplan, and ensure that new investors can invest with confidence. Without that, I fear the development corporation will follow the lead of INEOS and turn elsewhere. I really hope it does not come to that. That is why I was so determined to make the case for funding at the time of the Budget and why I secured this debate. We need a guarantee that when we have the land, the Government will stand fully behind us for the long haul.

I want to mention additional powers. Beyond central Government funding, there are other areas where the development corporation needs to be granted sufficient resources to maximise its potential. It needs to be able to offer financial incentives to potential investors so it is on the same level as other areas in the UK. Those may include enhanced capital allowances, which would help businesses on the site to invest in new technology and machinery—especially low-carbon, green infrastructure, on which we are keen to take a lead in the Tees valley. Powers to enhance the development corporation’s ability to raise cash for infrastructure, such as tax increment financing, would also be helpful. This would be a logical extension of the business rates retention scheme that has already been announced. I would like to know that Ministers are looking to expand the powers available through the special economic zone, which would offer further reassurance to investors as well.

Investing in infrastructure will also be an extremely important factor. Remediating the land, where necessary, is the first step. However, turning that land into a modern industrial site, with the roads, rail and services needed to function well and attract new investment, is crucial.

One especially important area is power, as affordable energy is vital if the site is to remain attractive to potential investors. As my Tees Valley colleagues and I have told the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the cap on the amount of electricity that can be supplied without paying supply levies on the private wire network operated by Sembcorp could be a deterrent to new industries.

Our local master plan sets out a vision for mixed energy sources focused on renewables, and includes the potential for either a gas or biomass-fuelled power plant. This will require significant investment, and in the medium term we have an established business here that is ready to invest its own resources in the development of a power plant, which could provide the affordable power needed for new industries looking at the site.

In conclusion, this issue is of overwhelming importance to my constituents. Barely a weekend goes by without people asking me what is happening on the site and when they will begin to see jobs. I know that locally everyone is working their socks off, and I pay tribute to all on the development corporation board, many of whom give up their time voluntarily.

However, I am afraid that I cannot bite my tongue as press releases lauding success continue to fly past when there is not yet a single new job on the site, and when we appear no nearer to a breakthrough on the ownership issue, or to seeing a firmer commitment from the Government on funding the overall clear-up. Although I understand the importance of commercial sensitivities and will always abide by them, it is important for the community and the country that there is some accountability about where we are and what is behind the delay.

I sincerely hope that this speech can prompt a constructive debate that is free from party politicking. No one here is talking Teeside down; we all want the best for the area, and we all know the brilliance and the potential of our constituents and our communities. This effort is a sincere and earnest one to do what I have pledged to do about something that is the responsibility of us all: to fight tooth and nail to secure the jobs and investment for this site and the wider Tees Valley, and to ensure the Government keep their promises and do right by the people we represent.

9.52 am

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mrs Moon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing today’s debate. It is on a very important issue—one that goes to the heart of what is happening on Teesside at the moment—and I join her in celebrating the achievements of so many local businesses, large and small, which we get to see week in, week out. They are brilliant and inspirational. I never cease to be amazed at the sheer range, scope and skill of the industrial base of the Tees Valley. It is remarkable; indeed, it is a national asset of the first order.

The hon. Lady’s constituency and mine lie at the heart of the project to deliver growth, jobs and prosperity in Redcar and Cleveland, which centres on the former steelworks site. There is no downplaying the social and economic magnitude of the closure of the steelworks in 2015. Everyone on Teesside felt the consequences, and everyone on Teesside was devastated for the workforce and their families. The closure was not their fault; the truth is that the headwinds confronting steelmaking at Redcar were strong and kept blowing in.

The mothballing of the site was announced in 2009, and after SSI reopened it in 2011 it made a loss in every subsequent year of operation. Amid the desolation that followed liquidation in October 2015, the Government made a promise, which I am proud to say is being honoured. That promise was that a new beginning would be made on this iconic site, underpinned by huge Government support to secure and remediate the land, and anchored in private sector-led growth and investment.
A vast amount of taxpayers’ money has been pledged, with £137 million awarded to the site in the 17 months that I have been a Member of this House. A further £74 million for transport improvements across the Tees Valley has been pledged, which the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) will know well, as he is the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

This funding is being directed through true local devolution, in the form of the Tees Valley mayorality. The Tees Valley Mayor has a set of powers that are the most extensive of any devolved region of England outside London, backed by the personal commitment of the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who grew up in South Bank, and supported by the Prime Minister, who came up in person in August 2017 to launch the South Tees Development Corporation, which covers the steelworks site. Over the past year, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have been joined by a whole series of ministerial colleagues, all of whom came away from the area with renewed understanding of, and enthusiasm for, the scale of the opportunity represented by the largest brownfield regeneration project in Europe.

The development corporation’s master plan is to create 20,000 skilled jobs on the site over the next 25 years. We are just into the second year of that plan. Surveys of the 2,200 acres of developable land are now 90% complete and 1,500 exploratory holes have been drilled and analysed—the land proving much cleaner than had originally been anticipated.

The first new staff are currently being recruited for MGT’s £650 million biomass plant, which is located at the development corporation. It is the world’s largest biomass plant and is nearing completion; it is now looking for around 50 local workers. Likewise, a £250 million energy from waste plant, run by PMAC Energy, has been announced on the Redcar bulk terminal land, 50% of which is owned by SSI in receiverness.

I completely agree with the hon. Member for Redcar that clean energy must lie at the heart of our local economy in future, and it would be remiss not to say a word to the Minister about carbon capture, utilisation and storage. We are entering a pivotal month for CCUS and storage. We are entering a pivotal month for CCUS and storage. We are entering a pivotal month for CCUS and storage. We are entering a pivotal month for CCUS and storage. We are entering a pivotal month for CCUS.

The hon. Gentleman interrupted my thread about the steelworks site. The combined authority in the area has now received more than 100 serious inquiries about investment on the site, with a first-phase pipeline worth upwards of £10 billion. That is being complemented by other enormous economic ventures. I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) present in Westminster Hall today. The £3.2 billion Woodsmith polyhalite mine, just outside Whitby, is a transformative economic venture; it will add roughly a sixth to the entire value of the Tees Valley economy, and the mineral that it produces will be shipped underneath East Cleveland and taken through to Teesport for distribution across the world. It is incredibly exciting. I visited the site in the summer; it is truly extraordinary and what is being achieved there will be of national significance.

We also have the prospect of a freeport; I was delighted that the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) mentioned that prospect. However, we need to be very clear that it will simply not be possible for us to achieve the type of freeport to which we are right to aspire, if we do not leave the European Union, if we do not leave the customs union and if we do not break free to some degree from the EU state aid rules, which would make it very hard to deliver the freedoms that we want and need to see.

At the heart of all this work, all of which I hope comes off, is Ben Houchen. The leadership that Ben has shown has been transformational. As a colleague, I can testify that he works to the point of exhaustion and displays unceasing commitment to engaging with businesses, foreign investors and the Government, to stand up for Teeside.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has acknowledged the role that Ben Houchen has played. Will he also acknowledge that the Tees Valley Combined Authority is actually made up of the five leaders of the local authorities and the directly elected Mayor, and that together they are contributing to this plan and this development?

Mr Simon Clarke: I absolutely will. It is hugely important that this work draws together the six figures who make up the board. Ben provides exemplary leadership in his role as the first directly elected Mayor of the area, but he would be the first to say that it would be impossible to achieve anything without buy-in from Hartlepool, Darlington, Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland, and Middlesbrough. It is a team effort. The project transcends party politics. It must; otherwise it will fail.

The hon. Gentleman interrupted my thread about Ben’s role. Let me pick it up by saying that Ben led the Tees Valley’s first trade mission to the far east earlier this year. He led a delegation of local representatives in discussions with the three Thai banks that hold an interest in the former SSI land on the development corporation site. An agreement in principle was reached, which expires in February 2019, to transfer that land and its assets to the local public sector. In parallel, compulsory purchase proceedings have begun, to ensure that the land is back under local control as soon as possible. Separately, there is good reason to believe that this work draws together the six figures who make up the board. Ben provides exemplary leadership in his role as the first directly elected Mayor of the area, but he would be the first to say that it would be impossible to achieve anything without buy-in from Hartlepool, Darlington, Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland, and Middlesbrough. It is a team effort. The project transcends party politics. It must; otherwise it will fail.

Mr Clarke: The Government have put themselves four-square behind the initiative to release that land. When Ben went to Thailand to meet the banks, the full
support of the British embassy was thrown behind him. I know that Ben is genuinely appreciative of the massive efforts made by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to make certain that we communicate to the Thai Government—as well as to the banks—that this issue is of material interest to Her Majesty's Government, and that there is an international diplomatic aspect to the need to release the land as quickly as possible.

None of this work is easy. The hon. Member for Stockton North is right that some of it will take years; there is no point in sugar-coating that. None of this lends itself to quick fixes, but critical progress is being made. We are much further forward from the ashes of October 2015 than we were in 2017 or 2016, and as a result, Ben’s work has been widely welcomed in our community. In September, he was voted “most inspiring person” by Tees Valley business leaders, and my constituents recognise that he is doing his utmost.

There is an upsurge of quiet positivity on Teesside, backed by analysis from the Bank of England showing that the number of unemployed people in the north-east is down by 18,000 on a year ago, and that our region accounted for almost a quarter of the entire reduction in UK unemployment over the past 12 months. The devolution of skills strategy to the north-east, and the £24 million that has been announced for our local authorities in the north-east, and the £1 million paid to the South Tees Development Corporation site is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our area, and I am determined that we should seize it.

Here we come to the crux of the matter. I am a realist about elective politics. At present, a gulf exists between the Conservative and Labour parties about our values, our economic strategy and our role in the world; but we have a responsibility to work together, as the hon. Member for Redcar said. It is, of course, the right and the responsibility of the Opposition to hold the Government to account in a spirit of constructive criticism, but we must avoid crossing the line into casting gloom or negativity over our area’s prospects. That is a fine judgment call, but I have the sense that whatever the Government offer is not enough, and nothing Ben achieves is right. That is not because Opposition Members have a better alternative; it is, I fear, because Ben and the Government are Conservatives. We have to push back against that. If the choice is between anger and hope, I am clear that anger will not trump the hope of new beginnings and a fresh start for our area. We must not dampen the public’s enthusiasm, and we must not spook investors about the economic prospects of our area.

Following the Budget, we heard a powerful intervention from Steve Gibson—the man who has been a beacon of hope for Teessiders since the 1980s—calling for an end to the downplaying of what has been achieved.

Dr Paul Williams: Is that the same Steve Gibson who, during my campaign to be elected as the Labour MP for Stockton South, endorsed the Conservative candidate?

Mr Clarke: And the same Steve Gibson who endorsed the Labour candidate for the mayorality of the Tees Valley in those self-same elections that spring. He has done more for our local economy, local football team and local identity than any of us has ever done. He is held in the highest regard and esteem by thousands of people across our area, and he should be listened to on these issues.

Likewise, after the 2017 Budget, the then-managing director of Trinity Mirror, Bob Cuffe, had cause to say: “Breaking News. Yesterday Teesside was at risk of an outbreak of optimism and hope. Families wondering if potentially good news had broken out. Thankfully Loyal Labour Forces came out quickly with Party Gloom Blankets to try and extinguish the hope.”

Today I add my voice to their pleas: let us draw a line under this before real damage is done. Let us focus on the undoubted opportunity that lies ahead and work together to build a better future for the Tees Valley.

Mike Hill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clarke: I will, although that was a peroration if ever there was one.

Mike Hill: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am an enthusiast for the Teesside area in my own right. Could he please bury what is rapidly becoming an urban myth, that the Mayor’s Office—Ben Houchen’s office—is separately funded by Government to the tune of £1 million?

Mr Clarke: The entire development corporation project and the Mayor’s office are funded publicly, in a manner that is completely open to public scrutiny. As with all devolved administrations across the country, the Mayor’s Office is there to champion the interests of the local area. It requires a certain amount of.staffing to do that, but I think that the leadership that is being shown from that office is absolutely integral to our hopes as an area of standing up on the stage alongside big cities such as Newcastle and Leeds, which have traditionally had a much louder voice than areas such as the Tees valley. With the disparate cluster of local authorities, we have not been able to speak with one voice. What has been achieved through devolution has astonished me. I was a sceptic about the devolution model; I thought it might just add another tier of intermediate, ineffective and bureaucratic government. It has done the opposite: it has leveraged an extraordinary amount of localised control and, more than that, has created a platform for Teesside to speak out nationally and internationally. That is a wonderful thing.

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much more sceptical and have accordingly lost time in the move towards devolution. Of course, it would be very remiss not to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s predecessor as Member for Stockton South, James Wharton, who was the relevant Minister at the time. It was his deal that the local authorities signed up to, and it was only thanks to him that powers of such breadth have been devolved and are there to be enjoyed by the people of our area.

10.6 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing the debate and for talking up our area—the positive things that are happening in our communities—but also for laying out the greater challenges that it faces. We are here to discuss the former steelworks site, where many of my constituents spent their working life before SSI walked out on our community and the Government failed to act to save steelmaking on Teesside. Local people still ask, “Why can Governments bail out banks for billions of pounds, and bail out other industries, including the steel industry in other parts of the country, but when it came to intervening to save that site in Teesside, they just walked away?”

Today’s debate is as relevant to my constituents as it was three years ago, when many of them lost their jobs virtually overnight. It is relevant because the latest statistics, published yesterday, show an increase in unemployment in my constituency. Many of my constituents look to the Government to act, but it appears that the Government have just been putting on an act. A procession of Ministers has visited Teesside to talk the area up, but talk is all we have had. When those Ministers came to the area and made their various announcements, they did not invite Redcar’s local Member of Parliament to join them. We all want to work together, yet we constantly find ourselves excluded. There have been dozens of press releases from the Mayor of the Tees Valley promising investment, but little if any has been delivered to date.

When MPs speak up to ask questions about what is happening and to demand answers, they are accused of talking the area down, putting investment in jeopardy and somehow working against those who are trying to solve the problems that we all face. I am sick and tired of that. None of us went into politics to talk our area down; we went into politics to work with whoever can deliver for our people. If that were not the case—as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), my near neighbour, has already said—why on earth would our local authorities, which have worked so well together for donkey’s years, press for a devolution deal with a Government they know to have stripped tens of millions of pounds from our local council services? It was because they wanted to achieve something. They wanted the crumbs that were coming from the Government’s table, because they would make that little bit of difference on Teesside.

It is, however, a fact that there has been a real lack of progress in bringing jobs and investment to the site and, for that matter, to other parts of the Tees Valley. Yes, there are legal issues to be resolved and land ownership to be sorted out, but it has been three years since the last steel was produced and not a single long-term job has been created on the site.

My real worry is not just that the Government are failing to deliver for the site, but that the local authorities, in the form of the combined authority and the metro Mayor, will never see the promise of the heavy money to develop the site fulfilled, because that is billions of pounds. Yes, there have been plenty of announcements and repeat announcements, but we need the Government to take real action, resolving the legal problems. We hear that progress is being made and that things are being done behind closed doors. We do not know the detail, but I know that it is not creating jobs.

More than ever, in the face of the uncertainty that Brexit brings, Teesside industry needs assurance and confidence in the UK. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) talked about the fact that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture and storage, and the importance of a project on that. I also chair the APPG on energy intensive industries. Those in industry on Teesside are beyond nervous about Brexit and what it means for them.

As a result of the proposed changes to the emissions trading scheme and escalating energy costs, we are facing a perfect storm that could land our big industries carbon tax bills running into millions, and cost hundreds more jobs on Teesside and thousands more across the country. We need an environment that can attract investors to the region, but daily news releases promising much but delivering nothing will not do that.

That includes a future for our Durham Tees Valley airport—a future that is more in doubt each day. That airport, and connectivity with London and the rest of the country, is crucial in attracting investors to the Redcar site and to elsewhere on Teesside. The Mayor promised to buy the airport, but we know that there is no more credibility to that plan than to his plan to achieve protected food status for the parmo, which doctors describe as a heart attack on a plate.

Mr Clarke: On the point about the parmo, I do not believe in the nanny state telling us what we should and should not eat. I love the parmo, and I will be the first to stand up for it. Everything in moderation.

On the airport, a non-disclosure agreement has been signed with Peel, the operators. I really do not think it is helpful or right to prejudice the status of those talks by dismissing the plan as something that will not happen. Precisely that attitude, frankly, led to Ben winning the mayoralty in the first place.

Alex Cunningham: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is blessed, like me, with a slim figure and a fast metabolism, and will be able to cope with the odd parmo. We have a duty to be held accountable and to hold others accountable for what they have said they will do, and we have to press on whether or not negotiations are going on elsewhere. The plans to develop the airport are shrouded in secrecy. The parties involved are bound by confidentiality agreements, and those of us who are asking questions on behalf of the people we represent are getting very limited answers.

We know some things though. We know that the £5 million grant to create an access road to the south side of the airport to allow further development has been allowed to lapse. Why? In reply to a letter from me, the chairman of Peel Group, which owns 90% of the...
airport, that his company has invested £40 million in the loss-making airport in recent years. He does not confirm that the airport will close in 2021 when the current agreements run out, but I fear that that is exactly what is on the cards if the Mayor fails to sort this out.

The final sentence of Robert Hough’s letter does tell a story. He apologises for not being able to be more helpful, and adds:

“We hope that we will receive support from the Combined Authority to take the airport forward in the most sensible and appropriate way, but the ball is not in our court.”

That means that the ball is in the Mayor’s court—the man who blocked a grant to the airport to attract more holiday flights just last year. I have every respect for the Minister, but I worked closely with him when we had a Mayor, and I am sure he will confirm that the Government are not going to bail the Mayor out and use public money to buy the airport. Who is going to buy an airport that continues to lose millions? I certainly do not want Tees Valley council tax payers to pick up that bill. It is time the secrecy was ended and we started to get answers on how the Mayor is going to buy the airport.

Secrecy, however, is the order of the day for this Government. A Public Accounts Committee report published yesterday said that “excessive secrecy” was standing in the way of, among others, the chemical industry preparing for Brexit. There appear to be plenty of secrets around the SSI site too. Budgets have come and gone, with millions of pounds allocated to the South Tees Development Corporation, but we know that most of that was just to cover the ongoing costs of keeping the site safe. Some of the delegated powers, such as devolution of the further education budget, have been delivered, fulfilling part of the agreement made with the combined authority long before we even had a Mayor. I now appeal to the Minister to provide the kind of clarity that we all need, but particularly the pensions Minister, and I am sure he will confirm that the Government are not going to bail the Mayor out and use public money to buy the airport. Who is going to buy an airport that continues to lose millions? I certainly do not want Tees Valley council tax payers to pick up that bill. It is time the secrecy was ended and we started to get answers on how the Mayor is going to buy the airport.

Mr Robert Goodwill: [Con]:
If the Minister takes nothing else from today’s debate, it should be the commitment of all parties and all players in the Teesside area to ensuring that the site, which sadly no longer produces steel, is seen as a big opportunity, as the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said at the start of her speech. With the Mayor of Tees Valley, Ben Houchen, leading on that, we are in a good position to mobilise everyone to make sure that it happens.

The Labour party has learned some harsh lessons about that. I was the candidate in Redcar in 1992, standing against Marjorie Mowlam. I do not think that Marjorie would have stood by in the way that her successor did, and not fought tooth and nail to keep that site. Labour learned that harsh lesson at the ballot box when a large Labour majority was swept away by a Liberal Democrat who did fight for the site.

Anna Turley: [Lab]: Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the steps taken by the Labour Government at that time mothballed the site and kept it open for another investor to come along and bring it back to life? The problem was that in 2015 this Government just turned off the switch and closed it, when they could have invested and kept it open like the Labour Government did.

Mr Goodwill: [Con]: I would leave that to the people of Redcar, who took that judgment in 2010 and did not feel that their Member of Parliament at the time had the commitment. I would not lay the same charge at the hon. Lady’s door. She has fought tooth and nail for that site, and has possibly learned some of the lessons of the past. People do understand whether a Member really is committed to the local people and industry, rather than seeing a constituency as a convenient place to get elected and then pursuing their career nationally.

As candidate, I visited the site on a number of occasions. At the time the blast furnace was operating at full bore, having recently been refurbished. I was shown two concrete bases on the South Gare site for the second and third blast furnaces that were due to be installed there. Indeed, we visited the basic oxygen steelmaking plant—the BOS plant—which at the time was colouring everything in the area with red dust, so some people in the area might not rue the passing of that big concrete building, which was where the crucibles of iron were blasted with oxygen and turned into steel.

Mike Hill: [Con]: On the subject of steel, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that thankfully the steel industry still thrives to a degree in Hartlepool, where our 84-inch, 42-inch and 20-inch pipe mills have brought much investment and many jobs to the area? While I have the Minister’s attention, will he confirm that as part of the growth for Hartlepool, a replacement for our nuclear power station is very much online, as per discussions that we have had in the past?

Mr Goodwill: [Con]: Absolutely. The steel industry has a future in the UK, but it is in specialist products, such as those produced in Skinningrove and Hartlepool. Sadly, we can no longer compete with the Koreans and Chinese in the production of bulk steel. The steel industry was based on Teesside because of the ironstone and coal mines up the coast. Now that we no longer have that resource on our doorstep, it is more difficult to be competitive in the steel industry, but we have expertise in specialist steels, stainless steels and specialist products, which I believe have a great future. Indeed, we have a strong automotive industry in this country to consume the steel that is being produced. I do think that there is a future for steel in the UK, but sadly it is no longer on the British Steel site that I visited with Peter Lilley, the then Secretary of State for Trade.
I mentioned opportunities on the site. The people of Tees Valley have put their trust in Ben Houchen as Mayor because they have memories of feeling let down in the past. They have opted for optimism, rather than for the negativity that was part of the other side’s campaign. I am very pleased that Ben is working collaboratively with local authorities and with the industry to deliver in the area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) recounted.

I must mention the Sirius mining project, which will transform my constituency. There are already 600 people working on the Woodsmith mine site, boring a mile down the shaft to the polyhalite—an amazing resource that will make the UK a global supplier of fertilisers once again. The Boulby mine is coming to the end of its natural life and has already ceased production of muriate of potash, but it is getting into polyhalite; indeed, I have bought some to use on my own farm. There are opportunities.

Alex Cunningham: As the Minister is in the room, it is important to acknowledge that we have only two fertiliser plants in the whole UK, one of which is in Stockton North, my constituency. Both plants are run by CF Fertilisers, and both are extremely worried by the Government’s proposals for a post-Brexit carbon tax, which they believe could ruin their business. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in calling on the Minister for clarity on the matter, so that the existing fertiliser plants can continue to have a future?

Mr Goodwill: Yes. I have visited the Billingham plant, and I know that ammonium nitrate is a very important plant nutrient. The development of shale gas is key. Ammonium nitrate is basically made from air and gas, so without a good, cheap and reliable source of gas, its production is under threat. The sooner we get on with fracking for that gas so that we have our own domestic supply, the better it will be for all the energy-intensive industries on Teesside, not least the fertiliser industry.

The potash site will transform the area by providing jobs, and not only to people in Whitby. Of those who are already working at the Boulby mine, about half are from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, about a quarter are from the constituency of the hon. Member for Redcar, and about a quarter are from my own. We already have a lot of people working in the mining industry, and it is important that they be redeployed as Boulby comes to the end of its natural life. The 23-mile tunnel from Whitby to Teesport is a phenomenal project that people around the world are observing with awe.

We need the Government to get behind the project. The hon. Member for Redcar mentioned Treasury guarantees; this is a very big project for a very small start-up company that will be an FTSE 200 company on the day it opens production. We need that support, because it would be a great shame to see other mining companies from around the world coming in and capitalising on the project after all the work that has gone into it. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will pass those thoughts on to the Treasury, because we need that backing. We are talking about 1,000 full-time jobs in the mining industry for at least 100 years. This is a product that people will always need; as long as people are eating, they will need nitrogen, phosphate and potash. The Woodsmith mine is a great source of potash.

Alex Cunningham: As a farmer, the right hon. Gentleman knows all about fertilisers. May I seek clarity on what he said about workers at the Boulby potash mine transferring to the new mine? Is something happening at Boulby that we do not know about?

Mr Goodwill: Boulby has been losing staff over the past few years and its production is being scaled down. It is already approaching the end of the muriate of potash seam—the potassium chloride seam—and is now in the lower seam of polyhalite, which is what the Woodsmith mine will produce. All mines have a natural life.

Mr Simon Clarke: There is no question but that Boulby has gone through a profound and difficult transition over the past year, with approximately 90 compulsory redundancies, but the owners would certainly want me to emphasise that they are still looking at a long-term future at Boulby. There may well be a transfer of staff between the two mines, but as far as I am aware, Boulby is not under any threat of closure or loss.

Mr Goodwill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, but the scale of operation at Boulby has reduced because of the switch from potassium chloride, which requires a lot of processing on the site. Polyhalite is a material that can be used straight away without any additional processing, so it qualifies as an organic fertiliser and many producers of organic food can capitalise on it. Indeed, one of the great things about Boulby’s mining polyhalite is that we can now start to develop markets for it around the world as it becomes available. Otherwise, we would not have had a new fertiliser product that is available for field trials, developing countries and big agricultural economies around the world, and that can be sourced from my constituency and exported to the world through that great facility, the deep-water port on the Tees.

10.26 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing this important debate.

I want to speak about my constituency’s experience of a steel plant closing down, because there are valuable lessons to be learned from it. The Ravenscraig integrated steel mill closed 26 years ago in 1992. That was before devolution, so there was no Scottish Government and all industrial matters were dealt with by the UK Government. In the mill’s last two years, 4,400 people—mainly men—were laid off. Unemployment stood at 15% shortly after the closure and is still higher than average. The constituency still does not have the same average. The constituency still does not have the same
in 2007, and lots of money has been poured in from various funds and resources. Ravenscraig Ltd was set up as a joint venture between Tata, Scottish Enterprise and Wilson Bowden when the plant closed. The site now has a new college, a new regional sports centre, less than 1,000 new homes—although more are being built—a pub, a hotel and a building research centre. There are proposals for more new homes and for a civic park. In 26 years, we have not come a terribly long way, given that it is a 1,400 acre site, most of which is covered by roads that do not necessarily lead anywhere yet.

I do not want to sound too pessimistic—as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) said, we need to have hope—but when something as big as the Ravenscraig integrated steel mill closes, that is a hammer blow to a community. Not much help, if any, was given by the then Conservative Government; I hope that the Redcar site does not suffer much help, if any, was given by the then Conservative Government; I hope that the Redcar site does not suffer the same fate. North Lanarkshire Council—of which I was recently a member, as the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) still is—is spending quite a lot of money on trying to make the site viable.

As the council’s new chief executive, Des Murray, says, it has always been recognised that there needs to be a redevelopment site at Ravenscraig, because it is of symbolic strategic significance, but we cannot live on symbols. The hon. Member for Redcar talked about Ravenscraig as an iconic site, as was Ravenscraig, but people cannot live on such sites. People do not get jobs just because sites are iconic. There needs to be real and continuous development.

I do not want to paint too gloomy a picture, because there are improvements. The new Ravenscraig regional sports centre has hosted international and national events to great success, and the new houses there are lovely. The site building is now creeping forward, and in April there was another planning application put in for a more modified, and probably more likely to be built, area in Ravenscraig, which now includes industrial and retail centres as well as two primary schools and development of the civic park. This is all good news, but I have to warn people in Redcar that it takes a long time and does not necessarily lead to the kind of jobs that have been lost.

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Lady is giving us a good illustration of why we need big, fast decisions and investment now. I am sure she will agree that Redcar cannot wait 20 years for the Tees valley to secure the good, well-paid jobs that we need. We do not want service jobs; we want good, well-paid jobs like we have had in the past—that needs decisions now.

Marion Fellows: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I do not have a solution, but I can only lay out what has happened at the Ravenscraig site. People have been doing their best, but the recession in 2007 really bit into developments there. When things get delayed, they do not always come back again, which is a real worry for everyone.

I give credit to North Lanarkshire Council, as I always do when it does things right, for continuing to work on the site and for trying to get more investment into it, but I fear that, with Brexit apparently here, this is going to be an ever-growing challenge to local agencies and authorities. Motherwell and Wishaw were iconic not just for Ravenscraig; there were always steelworks in my constituency. The fact that the Scottish Government managed to save what is now Liberty Steel—the DL works—and, in a neighbouring constituency, Clydebridge, is testament to the work that they have done and are trying to do.

We need steel. When I was first elected to Parliament, the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries was the very first one that I joined. I fought hard to save the steel industry in my constituency, and that was achieved. Ravenscraig does not make steel—it simply rolls plate—but it is still there. That is thanks to the work of the Scottish Government, who were determined to save that site and as many jobs as possible—not only the workers, but, more importantly, the apprentices who were working on the site at the time. It will be interesting to hear whether the Minister can give the same commitment to the industry in England and Wales. There are no longer steelworks in Redcar, but we need these iconic industries at our backs if we are to move forward as a group of countries.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland for saying that everyone has to work together, which I think everyone realises. It is not a party political issue when something like this happens, but things do move ahead on party political lines. We have to be cognisant of that fact, and people have to keep putting pressure on the Government to make decisions and to treat the area favourably, even if it is not recognised as a really good area for their party.

I go back to 1992, when very little was done by the central Government to support Ravenscraig and the workers who lost their jobs. I moved into the area shortly afterwards, and all I could hear was tales of how the steelworks used to be open and how Motherwell and Wishaw were such thriving, wonderful places. It took a long time for the towns to recover. They still have not recovered totally, because the jobs that people do now are completely different. I think that is what is found in Redcar, too.

Anna Turley: Regarding the hon. Lady’s experience, does she sense that there was a loss of skills and a loss of the workforce in any way? My big concern is that the longer this delay goes on, the more people will move away from Redcar to look for work elsewhere, and we will lose our highest-skilled and best workforce.

Marion Fellows: The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has already said that Scots people go all over the world looking for work. Yes, there were people who left and people who retrained. There was a very good deal in those days for the steelworkers who were made redundant; they were given, I think, two or three years’ training, which allowed many to go to college or university and completely retrain. In fact, my predecessor retrained and then became an MP, which was not necessarily what he retrained for, and he moved away—part-time, anyway—down here to work.

It really is important that all parties look at what happened after Ravenscraig shut, because that is comparable and it should be used as a template, in some regards to complement what is still going on there, but in others to...
look at this and say, “We mustn’t allow that to happen. We mustn’t allow things to stall and nothing to happen for long periods.”

10.36 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing this important debate. She is a champion not just for her constituents, but for steel communities across our country, and her passion for her local area shone through her speech.

It is clear that, out of crisis, there is an opportunity that must be seized. The news over three years ago that the Redcar blast furnace would be finally turned off was a terrible blow to all of us from steel communities. The closure of SSI marked the time when our country’s steel crisis first made headlines, as steel manufacturing ended in a region that had shaped the industry for 150 years. Despite emerging in the wake of the devastation of such huge job losses, the local master plan represents the best of regeneration. It unites the region around a plan that is ambitious for the communities and businesses of south Tees, and aims to create 20,000 jobs.

As the recent BBC series “The Mighty Redcar” highlighted so well, Redcar is a brilliant town. However, the investment needed to make the plan succeed is enormous. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar laid out, there are huge complexities in securing land and delivering plans. There is a simple truth here: in the last two years, the Government have not been shy of ministerial visits to the site, but the words are not yet matched by delivery of anything like the funds needed. As has been said, much of the funding announced is for the most basic security and Remediation work. The Government have a legal duty to keep the site safe, so much of the vaunted £118 million in last year’s Budget is to be used to comply with their legal duty to fund the site and to protect the public from industrial hazards.

The money for specific investment schemes is welcome, but it is far too little. Much more finance is required to complete the most basic infrastructure and land assembly works, let alone create an essential and inspiring mixed-use site at Redcar. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar said, companies were seriously looking to invest, but now have cold feet because of the Government’s failure to promise the real funds needed for the site.

Public funding has the power to unlock private investment, but it needs to be at a level that gives confidence to investors that the Government stand behind the scheme. Will the Minister use the opportunity he has this morning to outline specifically what further funding the Government will allocate to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of the master plan? Will he also confirm that there will be a commitment to the additional powers suggested by my hon. Friend who have spoken so eloquently today, which could help bring the delays to an end? Will he give clarity on the very serious issues surrounding the airport, as raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham)?

Examples such as this of essential schemes being delayed by this Government’s failure to commit highlight why Labour’s infrastructure plans are so important.

Success with schemes of this complexity and size is not won cheaply. We must invest to get the outcome that Redcar, the Tees valley and the whole country need. The next Labour Government will have communities such as Redcar at the heart of their programme, and I know that as our infrastructure plans are developed in detail, Teesside will not be forgotten.

I want to make something very clear. The closure of SSI was a consequence of a Government with no plan for steel—a Government who stood by as a great industry teetered on the brink and, in the case of Redcar, closed for the last time. This is an important point, because no doubt we are about to hear from the Minister—although I hesitate to put words in his mouth—about millions of pounds committed for Redcar and the site, special economic zones, and the work that the Government are doing. We should remember this: SSI Redcar collapsed because there was no policy to support British steelmaking properly, on energy costs, on taxation or on investment.

The tragedy is that we have seen very few steps forward in the last three years. Energy costs for British steelmakers are still 50% more than for European competitors, and calls for a fairer business rates system for large producers have been met with silence in Whitehall. Crucially, we still have no steel sector deal for our industry to bring together comprehensive action.

Mr Goodwill: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Gill Furniss: I am sorry; we must get on.

We have waited more than a year since steel companies set out what was needed, but we are yet to see action from this Government. Without that and wider industrial regeneration, there is little safety for other steel towns, and there is not the environment that will deliver success for south Tees.

This summer, Labour launched the Build it in Britain campaign, committing a Labour Government to using the capacity and expertise of Britain’s industries to fulfil far more of the country’s infrastructure needs. A Labour Government would have prevented the collapse of SSI Redcar, stepping in where this Tory Government were unwilling to save jobs and expertise to support the economy.

There will be a future for the south Tees site; I am sure of that. With great Labour women such as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar and council leader Sue Jeffrey fighting for their area, I am confident there can be huge success.

I have to say that I found the remarks by the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) about the former MP for Redcar, the late Marjorie Mowlam, very distasteful. [Interruption.] You referred to Mo Mowlam.

Anna Turley: The remarks were directed at my predecessor, Vera Baird, but my hon. Friend makes an important point, and I totally agree that the remarks were disrespectful; Vera Baird did her best in extremely difficult circumstances. I come back to the point that unlike the Conservative Government, the Labour Government saved the steelworks, which were reopened.

Gill Furniss: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.
Gill Furniss: [To the Minister]

To conclude, the Government must properly back this fantastic opportunity, not just for Redcar’s sake, but for our future economy. If they cannot deliver the ambitious plan that the South Tees Development Corporation master plan lays out, a Labour Government will.

10.44 am

Richard Harrington: Just currying favour with the Chair—but it is actually genuinely true. One of the most interesting days I have had in this job was spent visiting Mrs Moon and her constituency.

I thank the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing the debate. These are very important topical points and I congratulate her on the consistency of her representations on this project. The whole area is very lucky to have the MPs that it does—the hon. Lady, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and the other MPs who have spoken today. It is also lucky to have the Mayor, Ben Houchen.

There is a bit of an undertone of “who said what where”. That is not for me to go into, but I make a plea to all parties, including those not in the room, that these matters are much better dealt with on a consensual, cross-party basis. If anybody feels that I and my office can help in that, I am very pleased to offer that help.

Anna Turley: I concur with the Minister’s comments and I reassure him that the reason for calling today’s debate is to try to move on to the substantive issues of the site. I welcome the positive, constructive tone that we all co-ordinate together; I hope everyone realises that my office is very much part of that. I have certainly had nothing on my desk to do with this project that has been gratuitously turned down, ignored or not taken seriously.

I have been scrawling furiously during the debate to try to prepare to answer the points that have been made. I will try not to go over the history again, as it has been well covered by other contributors. Perhaps for the sake of Hansard it would be convenient if I did, but I think it has been said very well.

The South Tees Site Company is funded by a grant of £118 million, which was granted in the autumn Budget 2017 and includes £48.9 million for improving the site. The point was made—eloquently—that a lot of that money had to be spent, but it is still taxpayers’ money. It did have to be spent, and I hope that it is the first of very much more to come in the future.

There has been talk of different projects and implications that they have been turned down by the Government. My personal experience of doing this job is that I have spoken expensively—I mean extensively—to Liberty Steel. In its case, both those words might be true! I have spoken to it to get a project, which is still very much in outline. It has not been rejected. There has been nothing put in front of us.

It might have been the hon. Member for Redcar, or another speaker, who said that this project is going to Scotland. That is not the case. I am in regular talks with the company and I have been to its offices. I have met the chairman and other officials, several times, with our own experts, to try to get the project to a state where it can be looked at as a serious proposal. This is not a criticism, but it is not yet at that stage. I hope it will be. We meet regularly, and the company knows that the door is open.

As far as INEOS is concerned, its decision was taken for commercial reasons. As has been mentioned, I think it was more of a question of not wanting a brownfield site and a start from scratch, rather than anything to do with this site, the Government saying no or anything like that.

Alex Cunningham: I think the Minister will agree that the major impediment in our way—which, if resolved, could sweep away all that doubt—is the issue of land ownership and the associated legal agreements. When is that going to be resolved?

Richard Harrington: All in good time. I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date now, but I will come to that shortly. I will make progress because I want to leave time for the hon. Member for Redcar to sum up.

The £14 million granted by the autumn Budget and the special economic area status for the site are both important. They came about because all those different Departments—including the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Treasury—are working with South Tees Site Company, the development corporation and the combined authority. We have worked together on the proposals and will continue to do so. The 1,500 jobs quoted are a first step, but I know they are nothing compared to the number of jobs that were lost when SSI went into liquidation and struggled from crisis to crisis.
It is very easy to blame one Government and not the other or to say that the Government could have intervened by putting in a load of money to keep things going, but I have seen the consequences of that. I have seen places in the valleys in Wales where hundreds of millions—if not billions—of pounds were spent on keeping businesses open, and I saw a failed industrial policy in the north of England, where I was brought up. That does not mean that Government do not take part in industry—we are spending more money on research and development than ever before.

I really believe that the industrial strategy, in partnership with businesses, is the future. The reason why there is not a steel sector deal—as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) mentioned—is that industry itself has not come up with its side of the proposals. I am working on this, meeting industry regularly, and am still hopeful, but that is work that must be done in partnership.

The Government responded immediately with support for the site when the closure took place, including a sum of £30 million that was ring-fenced for the statutory redundancy payments. The SSI taskforce, under the leadership of Amanda Skelton, took a leading role and deserves a lot of credit. The hon. Member for Redcar was a member of the taskforce and did a great job.

The clichés about people working together are predominantly true in this case; spats and disagreements come and go. I think it is fair to say that we cannot recreate what was there before—time has moved on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) made the point about how steel has changed and certain commodity products cannot compete with much lower costs. Of the factors for the industry growing up there—iron ore, steel and water—only one remains. That does not mean that the site does not have a fantastic future—I really think it does. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Redcar quoted Lord Heseltine and former Chancellor George Osborne, and I was delighted that the hon. Member for Redcar quoted Lord Heseltine and former Chancellor George Osborne in different parts of her speech.

The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Motherwell, made a very—

Marion Fellows: For Motherwell and Wishaw.

Richard Harrington: I was abbreviating—my apologies to the half of the hon. Lady’s constituency that I did not mention. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) made some good points about apprenticeships, and I am very pleased about the way that apprenticeships in steel are going. I was pleased that all the apprentices at Redcar were found alternative jobs and positions. The experiences of Ravenscraig and Consett were fed into the creation of the solution, with the development corporation and so on. That does not compensate for what happened, but it shows that lessons have been learned.

The master plan is excellent, and proposals for additional funding will be carefully considered. They have to meet public funding guidelines, which I know all hon. Members will accept. The Government’s current position is therefore to commit resources in a number of areas. I accept the shadow Minister’s view that some of that is just hot air and announcements, but that is the way that public sector financing works; there is a principle and then there has to be a business case. I make no apology for that—that is the way it has to work. Business cases are not there to be stopped; they are there to be taken on board.

I really am running short of time—that is my own fault for giving too many compliments to most of the other speakers, which I should not have done—so I will hurry up. The subject of the airport, which was raised very eloquently, is not one that I have really concentrated on. Maybe I should have, but I have not. May I suggest a meeting with the hon. Members who are interested in the airport issue, rather than just giving a vague answer today?

We very much believe in the concept of a local solution, and the Government are very open to specific suggestions from private companies or from the development corporation. I hope we see through all the smoke about individuals—who should be in this or that job, or who said this or that—and come to the collective solution that we all want.

The debate has given me the chance to canter over matters. We must remember that the site is the UK’s largest regeneration opportunity, and if the UK is to develop in terms of its industrial strategy, which we hope it will and fully intend it to do, that will be there. The site has received much publicity thanks to the efforts of hon. Members present, the Mayor and everybody else involved in the development corporation. We know what the challenges are in the special economic area in the Tees valley. Even people who did not watch the documentary on television—I was very disappointed about the lack of a starring role for the hon. Member for Redcar; had I been in charge of casting I would have altered that—will know that these things take a lot of time. Decontamination has to happen first, before a deal with the banks, which I am sure will come about—these are very complex matters. It is not as if the banks are a single entity; there are three of them, with very different views.

The Government are determined to see the site redeveloped in an exciting way in the end, so that it is a flagship for our future industrial strategy and an example for the next industrial revolution as it was for the first.

10.57 am

Anna Turley: I appreciate the Minister’s response, which was thoughtful and considered, giving us a real sense of positivity. I am glad that he took the trip that he did when he was 17. Everyone who knows our area well knows that it is never forgotten. It is one of the most fantastic places in the country, and the sense of pride, opportunity and passion in our town and area will carry us through this situation and enable us to rebuild.

I thank all colleagues who participated in the debate. We have heard a fantastic range of views and experiences from the past, as well as important challenges and questions from this side of the Chamber. I also thank my colleagues on the Government Benches. As has been said many times, we will make a success of the site—bringing jobs, investment and opportunities for the people we represent—only if we work together constructively. I sought to secure the debate this week in particular because I was, frankly, disappointed at the nature of the Budget debate and the level to which it degenerated. I am pleased about the positive and constructive discussion that we have had today.
It is vital that MPs have the opportunity to represent their constituents and to ask these questions. We live in a democracy in which everyone in a public position is accountable for the decisions that they make. We all know that it will take time to regenerate the site, that the ownership issues are complex and that there are confidentiality issues at stake, but we have a fundamental duty to our constituents to raise these issues and to hold the Government to account. Anyone who knows me or my colleagues knows that we will be holding the Government’s feet to the fire every single day that we are in this job, to get the best for our constituents.

Today’s debate was held to make sure that the Government’s long-term commitment is there and that warm words and positivity are backed up by money. That will be the bottom line in all this. I am very proud of the work being done locally, and of the positive and constructive relationship that I have with Ministers. I am grateful that the Minister’s door is always open. We will continue to work together to champion businesses that seek to invest in our site and I am extremely positive about its future, which could unlock a new industrial renaissance in the Tees valley. The onus is on all of us to work together to drive that, and I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate to make that happen.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the former steelworks site in Redcar constituency.

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### Universal Credit Roll-out: Nottingham

11 am

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the roll-out of universal credit in Nottingham.

The latest stage of the universal credit roll-out in my city took place about a month ago, which is why I sought this debate. One of the vagaries of this place is that we cannot always get the debates that we want at the time we want them, so I am pleased to be able to raise the subject at this important early stage of the roll-out.

Some claimants in the city were already on universal credit, but many will remain on legacy benefits for a while longer, until managed migration. For the past month, however, all new claimants in our city have had to claim universal credit. So far, so simple, but having seen how the roll-out has gone elsewhere and its impact in communities that are very similar to mine, my constituents and I are anxious, fearing that this will be anything but simple. We are anxious that it will mean delays, reductions in benefits, debt, rent arrears, visits to food banks and more poverty. My colleagues in Nottingham—I am glad to be joined by three of them—and I do not accept that for our community. I believe that the roll-out should be stopped.

I will talk about experiences in similar parts of the country to ours, and specific concerns that I hope the Minister can address. It seems incredible that universal credit was first announced eight years ago. The rationale was to replace the six working-age benefits. The aim was to simplify the benefits system, improve work incentives, reduce the potential for error and fraud, and mitigate poverty among low-income families. Those are broad principles that we share—I certainly do—but universal credit as it is today is not that system, and it is the most vulnerable people who are suffering and will continue to suffer as a result.

We are pleased to have campaigned for—and, in the Budget two weeks ago, secured—money back into universal credit. That is, however, only a small fraction of the £7 billion in social security cuts still to come by 2022-23, according to Institute for Fiscal Studies analysis. That will both make families worse off and be worse for the Government and the state of the public finances—a point I shall cover later.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter before the House. What he cites is not specific to Nottingham; it applies to other parts of the United Kingdom, including my constituency of Strangford. Does he agree that this “simple” scheme, which is easy for those who are computer-literate, is not so simple for many? More consideration must be given to those who are not able to claim correctly due to genuine misunderstanding and miscommunication, given that they can be penalised with sanctions if they cannot work through the system. The system simply does not work for the ordinary person.

**Alex Norris**: The hon. Gentleman is right that what I have to say about Nottingham is informed by the experience of other parts of the country, so it will be true for every community in the land. Yes, the system is supposed to
be simple—we want a simple system that promotes work—but there are lots of pitfalls, which people with the best of intentions are falling into. I completely share his view that such people ought to be supported.

In June, I was startled to read that the National Audit Office had found that universal credit might end up costing more than the existing system, that it cannot prove that it gets claimants into work, and that it is unlikely ever to deliver value for money. We should all look at that.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend knows, the false economy of some of the new systems worries me. That is one of the reasons why I have always argued that advice services should be a statutory function. Citizens Advice states that for every £1 invested in advice services, we can save £10 from people falling out of the benefits system because of mistakes and so forth. Is not the worry about this particular form of the universal credit roll-out that it is leaving people confused and in a messy situation, without proper advice from the system to fall back on?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend—my neighbour—for his contribution. I absolutely agree with that. I am passionate about advice services. As he knows, in October last year I led a debate in Westminster Hall on advice services in our city. They do incredible work to help people find a way through that fog, but they are clearly under real pressure. Our council is also under extraordinary financial pressures, but has put more into the area, trying to support it when many other services are not being treated similarly. I am pleased it is doing that, but a real need is clearly building up. I will cover much of that.

It is important to understand the context of what has happened elsewhere. The Trussell Trust found that 12 months after roll-out, on average, food banks see a 52% increase in demand, compared with 13% in areas that have had universal credit for three months or less. The Children’s Society has estimated that under the proposal for an earnings threshold, about 1 million children living in poverty will miss out on free school meals. That will almost entirely affect working families. Furthermore, under universal credit, £175 million for meals. That will almost entirely affect working families. Furthermore, under universal credit, £175 million for meals. That will almost entirely affect working families.

Alex Norris: I share that view, and it saddens me. I have been a Labour party member for all my adult life, and I am proud to be a Labour party Member of Parliament. The meaning of “Labour” is work, so we believe that work is good for people. We want people to work, so when we hear of a welfare system that promotes work but provides a safety net, we think, “Yes, that’s good. Even better, it’s going to be simple.” What was and is never explained is the bit after the asterisk: “Also, it’s going to be a vehicle for reducing the benefits bill”—even though there is no evidence to suggest that it will succeed. That is why we have a lot of the challenges and the chaos. The Library estimates that in February this year, nearly 13,000 people were not paid in full on time, and 7,500 people did not receive any payment at all.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Not only are people not paid on time, but many people have their claims rejected. They then have to go through the process of seeking mandatory reconsideration and sometimes an appeal. A large proportion of those appeals are successful, but in the meantime people have racked up debts, and in some cases even been evicted from their home. That has a significant impact on them, their families and their mental health. Is not that failure to maintain someone’s benefits during an appeal a problem with the system that the Government should address?

Alex Norris: I completely agree. When claimants are successful on appeal or at tribunal, they get their payments backdated, and I sometimes read, “So that’s all okay, then.” It is not, because in the meantime that has put extraordinary pressure on people who are, by definition, vulnerable. That is not to mention the anxiety. I am grateful to colleagues for their contributions.

I have listed quite a few numbers; it is important to start with the context and what has happened elsewhere, which is what I think is coming to us. We have to remember, too, that behind every one of those statistics is a human being, a family and a life. We in this place have a real duty of care to ensure that we look after those people, and that the changes that come about from legislation from this place support them.

In my constituency, about 20,000 people either already receive universal credit or—the bigger chunk—are on the six legacy benefits and will move on to universal credit at some point. That is about one in four eligible adults. The issue is significant, so it is important for me to focus on it in my role. We hear the stories about what has happened; they show the devastation of lives and the injustice.

I have received support and information from local advice services; my hon. Friend the Members for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and I recently attended a meeting with Advice Nottingham. We were grateful to hear the direct experiences of those who give advice and those living in the benefits system. Beyond “Brexit”, “hostile environment” must be the defining political term of the year. I contend that the term applies not just to the Home Office’s immigration policies and Windrush, but to welfare. Having talked to those individuals, I felt that they were the victims of such an environment. Slightly beyond universal credit, my friends at Disability Direct in Nottingham say that at tribunal, they are successful between two thirds and 70% of the time. If those who appeal at tribunal are winning more than two out of three times, the system does not work.

I would like the Minister to consider a couple of practical issues that have been raised with me. The first is on digital support and access to online services.
Nottingham City Council has very helpfully provided a list of public access computers to try to quell worries. Advice Nottingham says that it was assured by the Department for Work and Pensions that support would be available from work coaches at all jobcentres, and that any new universal credit claimant needing support would be able to get help from a jobcentre on demand. We have three jobcentres in Nottingham city: two in the city centre and one in Bulwell in my constituency. Those are obvious locations for a jobcentre, but we are a big city, so many people must travel more than half an hour by tram or bus to get to them. There is a real cost implication for vulnerable people, especially if multiple visits are needed. That needs consideration.

We are in the very early stages of universal credit, but I have already heard an example from Advice Nottingham of how it is not working in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South; I hope she does not mind my borrowing it. A client wanted to make a universal credit claim and had no digital support at home—no computer or smartphone. They travelled for 35 minutes, mainly by tram, to their nearest jobcentre, as they had been told to, at a cost of £3.50 for a day ticket. When they arrived, the work coach told them to visit their local advice agency, which was Clifton Advice Centre, where they would get help. No one at the jobcentre offered to help them complete their application or pointed them in the direction of the local library, where they could get digital support. Instead, they travelled back home and made an appointment to see a welfare benefits adviser, losing time, money and peace of mind in the process. The system is not working.

I have spent time with my local jobcentre staff, and I know them to be committed folks with the best of intentions who are making the best of a difficult situation, but they must have the right skills.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point about people’s access, even to make a claim. My constituent Errol Richards spent the whole of the last two weeks trying to make an initial claim, without success. He initially tried to register his claim at Jobcentre Plus, but his claim crashed before he could attempt to submit his identification documents, and there was no scanner available. He then made two lengthy visits to different libraries in Nottingham, but still could not submit the initial claim because the universal credit system crashed again. Should the Government have not addressed those problems and ensured that their IT systems were sufficiently resilient before trying to roll out universal credit to thousands of additional claimants?

Alex Norris: I am very sad to hear that contribution. Clearly, that individual is trying to do the right thing, and the system is not supporting them. That is not particular to Nottingham; it has happened throughout the roll-out process. It is not acceptable to impose universal credit on our community while knowing that these challenges would happen. Accessibility is a real issue. The one-size-fits-all approach of digital technology must be considered, because that poses a challenge in communities such as mine.

My advice to constituents on all big changes such as these is to engage and be proactive, and not to put letters in a drawer. When people come to see me at surgeries, I wish, as all other hon. Members do, that I could have seen them two weeks earlier, or one letter left in a drawer earlier, because that would have helped. I was talking to a colleague last night, while rehearsing some of my arguments. His constituency is further ahead in the roll-out, and he said that a constituent had tried to be proactive because, having heard about all the challenges, they did not want delayed payments. The person was on legacy benefits and did not need to transfer, but they transferred anyway, so their universal credit application was, in essence, a new claim. That unnecessarily kicked them off the old legacy benefits and into the new system, which meant that they would lose their transitional protection. Even when we try to help, the perverse incentives in the system mean that there is a risk that we do more harm than good.

Christmas is coming, and in Nottingham we have big retail and services sectors, which will mean that for many constituents and residents in the city, there will be a chance for extra hours. There is not enough awareness of, and support for people to understand, how changes in their income will affect their universal credit. The money comes into their bank, and they realise they are not getting what they had banked on, because those extra hours do not necessarily mean the extra income that they thought they would get. I have been contacted by the GMB trade union. I refer colleagues to the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, because I have long history of campaigning with it. It has produced useful advice, because it fears that staff will not know about that. Across the system, we need people to understand that if they do more, they must factor that into the calculation; otherwise, they will get a nasty surprise.

I feel particularly strong about my final point. Many aspects of universal credit are exceptionally important, which is why we are having this debate. They get a lot of coverage, but the issue of joint claims and split payments does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman or the mother. I was recently told by a constituent that they have used services in Nottingham for a number of years; that tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman or the mother. I was recently told by a constituent that they have used services in Nottingham for a number of years; that tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman or the mother. I was recently told by a constituent that they have used services in Nottingham for a number of years; that tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman does not. At the moment, when applying for universal credit, couples make a joint claim and a single benefit award goes to the household—either to one recipient or into a shared bank account. In the past, at least child tax credit could be expected to have gone to the woman,

The single payment creates an opportunity for abusive partners to exert financial control over their spouse by withholding funds and making it difficult for them to access money to meet their and their children’s needs, or to leave the situation. Refuge reports that one in five women and one in seven men experience that type of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse can request that their payments be made separately as part of an alternative payment option, but the guidance given to work coaches is that split payments can be considered only where the claimant notifies the DWP of financial abuse.
land if they think that a woman will march down to the jobcentre, possibly with her abuser, and request that payments be split because at some point she might want to leave that abusive relationship. That is unnecessary and damaging, and it needs to be resolved straight away. The Scottish Parliament has already passed legislation to split payments by default; the implementation is yet to be finalised, but it is vital that the Government pay full attention to that and seek to replicate it as soon as possible.

We want a welfare system that promotes work, but protects people in tough times; however, we have made our safety net out of barbed wire. That is wrong. Advice services in Nottingham are doing their best to help; Nottingham City Council is doing its best; DWP staff will do their best to make it work. Fundamentally, the system does not work; it should not be imposed on my community until it does.

11.18 am

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) gave us an interesting contribution, and we heard interventions from a number of colleagues. I will respond to those, but I start by putting into context where we are in terms of job figures.

I suspect we all agree that ultimately we want a welfare system that supports individuals, is fair to taxpayers and helps people into work. Yesterday, the Office for National Statistics published employment statistics that showed more people in work now than at any time. The rate of women in work is at a near record high. The employment rate for people with ethnic minority backgrounds is at a record high. Youth unemployment has halved since 2010. Since 2013, almost an extra 1 million people with disabilities have come into the workforce.

Some 3.3 million jobs have been created since 2010. There is always a discussion about what kind of jobs those are. Some people suggest that they are low-paid jobs that are not permanent, but that is not the case: 75% of the jobs created since 2010 are full-time, permanent and in higher-level occupations that attract higher salaries—not my statistics, but those of the Office for National Statistics.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that in a half-hour debate, interventions from the Front Bench are not permitted.

Lilian Greenwood: I am sure we have all heard what the Minister has said. Of course we welcome the fact that more people are getting into work, but many of the cases that we deal with in our constituencies are of people who are on universal credit not because they are out of work, but because they are in work and simply not earning enough to support their families. Many of the ways in which universal credit works do not support people who are in work, so people who have a fixed pay date but get paid early one month because the date falls on a weekend or a bank holiday find that they get two pay sessions in their universal credit assessment period and lose their universal credit altogether. Why is the Minister not addressing those concerns for people who are in work but not earning enough to be out of poverty?

Alok Sharma: I had just started to set out the case. Opposition Members have made a case, and I am responding to it.

I return to the point about the jobs that are being created. There is always a lot of noise about zero-hours contracts, and I am pleased that we as a Government have banned exclusivity in them, but in the economy right now, fewer than 3% of jobs are classed as zero-hours contracts and those individuals are working an average of 25 hours a week. The number of zero-hours contracts has come down this year.

I hope we are all pleased that wages are growing at the fastest rate in almost a decade. That is an incredibly positive development and I hope it will continue. I do not want to be churlish, but several hon. Members who were here in 2010 will remember that we were told by Opposition Members that 1 million jobs would be lost as a result of the Government’s policies. That has not happened. We have a buoyant jobs market with more than 3 million jobs created since 2010. Our welfare reforms have played a big part in ensuring that we are helping people get into work.

When we talk about universal credit, we have to compare it with the legacy benefit system that it replaces. As constituency MPs, we know that the legacy benefit system is incredibly complicated, with six benefits delivered by three different Government agencies, effective tax rates of 90% for some people and cliff-edges that disincentivise people from taking on work beyond a certain number of hours. As a result, 1.4 million people were trapped in benefits for almost a decade. Hon. Members talk about the amount of money in the system, but under the legacy benefit system, £2.4 billion of benefits are not claimed. That will change under universal credit, which will benefit 700,000 households to the tune of an average of £285 a month.

When it comes to universal credit, we are providing that support. I know that the hon. Member for Nottingham North has visited his jobcentre and sat with jobcentre staff. I am pleased that he has praised their work. He will know, because he has sat in on those interviews—as I saw in his newsletter—and seen the interaction, that for the first time in the welfare system, we are ensuring that one-to-one support is provided to the individuals we are interacting with. As part of my role, I regularly go up and down the country visiting jobcentres. Invariably, I hear from jobcentre staff that they feel that this system allows them to do what they came into the system to do—provide that one-to-one support. I find that incredibly heartening.

As I said, the cliff-edges are gone and we have a smooth taper. Under universal credit, people are getting into work faster, staying in work longer and earning more. In terms of support in the system, we introduced an extra £1.5 billion of support earlier this year. I am disappointed that Opposition Members did not vote with us on that, because it meant that the seven-day waiting period was abolished; two weeks of run-on in housing benefit was made available, which does not have to be repaid; and people can now get 100% advances on day one, if that is what they need, to help with any
cash-flow issues. We can see that that is working, because 60% of people who are now coming on to universal credit are taking up advances. That is a result of the support that their work coaches are providing.

In last month’s Budget, another £4.5 billion net was injected into universal credit. Work allowances are up by £1,000, which will benefit 2.4 million families up and down the country, particularly those on low incomes, to the tune of £630 a year. In terms of helping individuals, as we have ensured that there is a two-week run-on for those who are on housing benefit coming on to universal credit, we shall also ensure that there is a two-week run-on of out-of-work Department for Work and Pensions legacy benefits for those who come across to universal credit as part of the managed migration process. Again, that will help more than 1 million households throughout the country.

Lilian Greenwood: Many people will have welcomed the Chancellor’s announcement that the universal credit work allowance was to be raised by £1,000, but it was raised for only some universal credit recipients. Admittedly, it increased for people with disabilities and parents with current responsibilities for children, but low-paid working couples whose children have left home or who do not have children were excluded. Poverty is poverty. Why was support provided for some families and some individuals but not others? Why did those working families not benefit from the £1,000 increase?

Alok Sharma: I would have more sympathy for the hon. Lady’s argument if she had voted to support the Budget, which Opposition Members did not do. I feel strongly that although it is right that hon. Members on both sides of the House raise the issues they have with any system or policy of the Government, the point where money is being put into the system to support their constituents and mine is the point at which they have to follow through and support those policies.

The hon. Member for Nottingham North has engaged with his jobcentre by visiting and taking part in a Disability Confident event organised by it, but that is not the same for all hon. Members present. I would encourage every single hon. Member—[ Interruption. ] I did not allude to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), but there are hon. Members who have raised issues in the debate who have not visited their jobcentres recently. I encourage all hon. Members to engage with their jobcentres.

Where hon. Members have individual issues, they should raise them directly with the jobcentre and they should feel free to write to me as the Minister responsible. Again, I do not wish to be churlish, but—if I may put it like this—there has not been a large amount of correspondence about universal credit from hon. Members representing Nottingham, but where there are issues, they should feel free to raise them.

In terms of preparation by the local jobcentre, I had an opportunity yesterday, ahead of the debate, to speak to the district lead for Nottingham who is responsible for the three jobcentres. There has been a huge amount of engagement: 350 stakeholders have been met and eight or nine stakeholder events have taken place, including meeting landlords. That is all part of ensuring that we deliver what we all want for our constituents—a system that works.

Whatever our political differences, one thing that we can unite on is that we want a system that delivers, particularly for the most vulnerable, which is precisely what universal credit is doing. We want a system that supports the most vulnerable, that is ultimately fair to taxpayers, and that helps people into work.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
M4 Upgrading: South Wales

[SIOBHAIN MCDONAGH in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered financial support for the upgrading of the M4 in South Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms McDonagh. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I appreciate that this subject is slightly off-topic for him, but in the absence of a Wales Office Minister or a Treasury Minister, we appreciate his presence. I ask that he feeds thoughts, remarks and insights from the debate to relevant colleagues.

I want to return to a subject that has been discussed many times over the years, in this place and the Welsh Assembly. It is a subject that every Welsh Secretary in the past 30 years and every First Minister of Wales during the devolution era has had to consider at some point. It is probably the largest and most controversial infrastructure project on the table in Wales; it is certainly the longest running. I am talking about the proposed upgrade of the M4 motorway around Newport to tackle severe congestion on a part of our road network that is vital for the whole south Wales transport corridor.

Most recently, the M4 project featured in last month's Budget statement, when the Chancellor stated that he was willing to consider increasing Welsh Government borrowing powers to support the delivery of a new M4 relief road. That decision should receive scrutiny in the House.

Overall competence for road improvements in Wales lies with the National Assembly in Cardiff, and the decision on whether to go ahead at all with the M4 proposal is for the Welsh Government and Assembly Members alone. However, given the ongoing discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury about the Welsh Government's financial powers in relation to the scheme, the announcement in the Budget, and the UK Government's overall responsibility for the health of the UK economy, it is right that our Parliament—especially Members from Wales—has an opportunity to comment on the matter. This is certainly a timely moment to do that.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He rightly mentioned the long history of this matter, but does he agree that, given that tolls are about to be taken away from the Severn bridge, it is imperaterv that a solution is found on the issue of the Brynglas tunnels?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman makes a vital point, which I hope to make myself later. He is absolutely right. There is an urgency to this issue that certainly seizes the business community and that we in the House should all be aware of, too.

I am told that we are just weeks away from a binding vote on the scheme in the Senedd, with the Welsh Government due to announce their response to the public inquiry that ran from February last year to March this year. Members of this place have no reason to be neutral on the outcome of that vote. We are not disinterested bystanders. Every single current Labour and Conservative Member of Parliament from Wales stood on a manifesto commitment to fix the M4 problem. My party's 2015 manifesto stated that a Conservative Government at Westminster

“will continue to work with the Welsh Government to deliver major improvements to the M4”.

Our track record of willingness to work to give new financial powers to Wales demonstrates that we are indeed doing that. My party’s Assembly election manifesto in 2016 contained a pledge to

“start work on an M4 Relief Road within 12 months of forming a government.”

Welsh Labour’s manifesto at that election stated:

“We will deliver a relief road for the M4”,

and its general election manifesto just last year repeated that promise to deliver a

“new relief road for the M4”.

Politicians from both major parties and at both ends of the M4 have campaigned for and made promises about the upgrade project. Furthermore, the UK Government’s responsibility for the Prince of Wales bridge, which connects this section of the M4 to the wider UK motorway network, and our decision to remove the tolls on that bridge next month, which the hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned, mean it is important for the House to debate this matter.

Just so we are clear, we are not discussing a project of special interest to just one or two constituencies. Indeed, my constituency is about as far from Newport as Newport is from London. Even so, numerous businesses in my constituency rely on being able to get through the M4 bottleneck. It is hard enough for a business to stay competitive when it is on the geographic periphery and faces additional transport costs anyway without congestion problems undermining its position further.

Mansel Davies & Son, which is probably Wales’s most important road haulage firm for the dairy industry and is the largest employer in north Pembrokeshire, runs 40 lorries each way through this section of the M4 every day. Every one of its drivers would be able to describe far better than I can the problems they face negotiating that section of the motorway. Such is the strategic importance of the M4 corridor, which links Wales to the rest of the UK, to Ireland via the ports of Fishguard and Pembroke Dock in west Wales, and, crucially, to the continental mainland, that this should be considered a project of true national significance. I am pleased that we have the opportunity to discuss it today.

The key issue is that this vital section of the M4, which is one of the most heavily used roads in Wales, is not for fit for purpose. It does not meet modern motorway design standards, and the resulting congestion causes unreliable journey times. That has direct economic impacts on south Wales. The M4 between junctions 28 and 24 was originally designed as the Newport bypass, and design amendments in the 1960s included the first motorway tunnels to be built in the UK, which are now known as the Brynglas tunnels.

This section of the M4 has many lane drops and lane gains, resulting in some two-lane sections, and it has an intermittent hard shoulder and frequent junctions. It is often congested, especially during weekday peak periods, resulting in slow, stop-start conditions, with incidents frequently causing delays. It has been like that for many years, and the problems are getting worse.

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[Stephen Crabb]

In the closing remarks to the public inquiry that ended in March this year, the Welsh Government’s QC, on behalf of Welsh Ministers, called the traffic delays a “pressing problem demanding a solution”. Former Prime Minister David Cameron used even more graphic terms when he visited a haulage firm in south Wales in November 2013, saying congestion on this section of the M4 acts as a “foot on the windpipe of the Welsh economy”. Strong words—but he only echoed the kinds of words that businesses right along the south Wales corridor use about the M4.

The managing director of a major south Wales haulage firm told me recently that this section of the M4 is becoming a “no-go area”. He said:

“From 7.30 to 10 o’clock in the morning, and then from 4 o’clock to 6.30, it’s like a car park.”

He described how it often pays for his heavy goods vehicle drivers to park up at the motorway services for an hour or two to save their stipulated driving hours, so they are not used up crawling along in near-stationary traffic. That is not an efficient way of running a logistics operation. In an economy that increasingly demands just-in-time delivery, a key transport corridor that grinds to a halt twice a day is certainly bad for business.

Ahead of the debate, I received a helpful note from the Freight Transport Association, which backs the need for new investment to fix the M4 problem. It stated:

“The Welsh supply chain moves goods by road much more than other modes, and so maintaining targeted roads investment is vital to securing Wales’ economic future.”

It added that “the M4 in South Wales forms part of the Trans-European Transport Network, which provides connections throughout Europe by road, rail, sea and air. The M4 plays a key strategic role in connecting South Wales with the rest of Europe...It is a key east-west route being the main gateway into South Wales...It is important therefore that development of the M4 around Newport is not viewed as a ‘local’ issue...The strategic importance of the M4 requires that it be viewed in the national context.”

Yet the truth is that this vital route does not have a proper motorway right now. The section we are discussing would not be allowed to be built today, given that it does not meet modern design standards. CBI Wales director Ian Price said business have been “crying out” for a relief road for more than 10 years. He added:

“The M4 is responsible for 20% of our national GDP and a relief road is projected to return to the Welsh economy £2 for every £1 invested.”

We could spend all day talking about the different ways in which businesses in Wales are affected by the problems with the M4, and why there is such a strong economic case for investing in a relief road, but I want to flag up one of Wales’s special strengths. We are incredibly good at hosting major national and international events. It is really good for the whole of Wales that the capital city, Cardiff, is increasingly recognised as a fantastic city in which to host events such as the Champions League final, the rugby world cup, Ashes cricket tests and—depending on our taste—Ed Sheeran concerts. I would love to see the Commonwealth games come to Wales, too. We also want more of those events to spread along the south Wales corridor and involve Newport, Swansea and places further west.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Would the right hon. Gentleman also include the opening shortly of the new international convention centre at the Celtic Manor? That will hopefully invite lots of new events to our area.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the new convention centre. We have all seen it being built while driving along the M4, and we have been encouraged by how it has come on. It is a major new asset for business in south Wales, but if it is to achieve its potential, we need that traffic to flow much better.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that when that wonderful new convention centre opens, one of its clients might be the Conservative party? It could host one of its next conferences there. Would he welcome that? Perhaps we could invite the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) along as well.

Stephen Crabb: Nothing would please me more than seeing the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) formally open a Conservative party conference in south Wales. I have no particular influence over where Conservative party events are held, but the Minister is listening with wide open ears, and I am sure he will feed those views through to the party chairman.

When it comes to major events, however, everyone knows that our Achilles heel is our transport problems. Of course we welcome the UK Government’s decision to scrap the tolls on the Prince of Wales bridge, which is estimated to save regular commuters up to £1,400 a year. We want that to attract new investment, jobs and tourism to Wales. The Welsh Government’s report suggests that our action on that will boost the Welsh economy by £100 million. However, as the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said, modelling predicts an increase of up to 20% in traffic as a result of the tolls being removed. The congestion issues around the Prince of Wales bridge and Newport are already severe, and the increased traffic will create further problems, without there being additional infrastructure in place. As the Freight Transport Association says,”This places greater emphasis on ensuring that the M4 upgrade is fit for purpose.”

The UK Government have shown that they are committed to boosting the Welsh economy, helping commuters and businesses, and increasing investment. We need the Welsh Government and the Assembly to step up and deliver the M4 upgrade.

As many hon. Members will be aware, a solution has been on the table for more than 20 years. In March 1989, the then Secretary of State for Wales commissioned the south Wales area traffic survey of possible solutions. The subsequent 1990 report identified the need for substantial improvement to the M4. As a consequence, a proposal for a relief road around Newport, a new dual three-lane motorway to the south of Newport, which was later known as the new M4 project, was included in the Welsh trunk road forward programme in 1991. An M4 relief road preferred route was published in 1995 and amended in 1997.

There were further iterations of the relief road plan over the years once responsibility for the road was devolved to the Welsh Assembly, but essentially the plan has followed the original work done in the mid and
late '90s. A draft Welsh Government plan was published in September 2013 and was the subject of public consultation from September to December that year.

Five years on, we are still waiting for a decision by the Welsh Government. That brings us to the question of financial powers and the limits on Welsh Government capital borrowing, which was referenced in the Budget. I am aware of the argument that occurred immediately after the Budget between Welsh Ministers and UK Ministers about whether an extension of borrowing powers should be linked to the delivery of the M4 relief road. I have no interest in getting involved in that, other than to note that the use of the M4 upgrade as a justification for securing new powers from Westminster has been a long-running feature of the devolution debate.

Indeed, upgrading the M4 may have been used as an argument in the original referendum campaign for why an Assembly was needed in the first place. It was certainly used as an argument in the debate in 2013 about full law-making and financial powers that led to the Silk Commission, in which the First Minister said:

“We literally could not do things. We could not improve the M4 without borrowing powers—it will not happen.”

The 2013 deal between the Welsh Government and the UK Government was to give the Welsh Government early access to those original borrowing powers precisely so that the M4 project could get going.

The project is now being used as an argument for securing even more borrowing powers. I can understand the need to extend the capital borrowing limits, given that the projected costs of the M4 upgrade are now higher, but part of me is starting to question whether some are using the project as a fig leaf to enable agreement on more powers and debt for the Welsh Government, without there being any serious intention of getting the M4 fixed. Given the passage of time, I can understand the considerable scepticism in some circles about the project. I hear the phrase, “It will never be built”, quite a lot around Cardiff.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an important speech about the importance of the M4 to the south Wales economy, and his point about the Welsh Government is well taken. Is the A55 in north Wales not also an example of an issue on which promises have been made consistently? It has been promised for years that two roundabouts in my constituency, which are on a recognised European expressway, will be dealt with, but we are still waiting. Are the same excuses not being used in north Wales as in south Wales?

Stephen Crabb: I agree with my hon. Friend. The A55 project is overdue, as is the M4 project, and I will go on to make the same point about the dualling of the A40 in my constituency. There is a shopping list of projects that need to happen for the Welsh economy’s benefit.

I recognise that big infrastructure projects are challenging, costly and controversial, that they require difficult trade-offs with other priorities, and that important environmental and conservation issues have to be taken into account, but they are still essential for improving the productivity and economic wellbeing of our nation. Two things are vital for any nation that wants to throw off the shackles of poverty: investment in skills and investment in high-quality infrastructure to boost economic performance.

I am fed up of seeing Wales languishing towards the bottom of all UK economic league tables, and of the fact that parts of Wales are known for being poorer today than parts of the former Communist bloc. That does not have to be our future, but changing it requires making choices and taking action. Spraying grants around to attract trophy projects to Wales, or to prop up certain companies that enjoy particularly good insider relations with the Welsh Government, does not amount to an economic strategy, and is no substitute for choosing to take difficult decisions about investing in long-term infrastructure assets.

As we all know, the truth is that the M4 relief road should have been built by now and we should not be here today talking about this. It is almost 30 years since the late Peter Walker, then Conservative Secretary of State for Wales, commissioned that original south Wales area traffic survey to look at solutions for the M4. It is a full quarter of a century since a public consultation was launched on possible solutions. It is 23 years since another Secretary of State for Wales, William Hague, announced his preferred route. It is five years since former Prime Minister David Cameron and former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg went to Cardiff to announce new financial powers for the Welsh Government to enable the M4 upgrade to happen. Everyone knows that it should have been done by now, and that we should look at other key projects, such as the A55 upgrade, mentioned a few moments ago, and the dualling of the A40 between St Clears and Fishguard. Those are important infrastructure projects too, but they are stuck in the queue because of the lack of progress on the M4.

When I was an Under-Secretary of State at the Wales Office—I think it was in 2013—I was asked about the M4 upgrade. William Hague, who was Foreign Secretary at the time, was sat next to me on the Front Bench. After I had taken the question, he leant across to me and said, “Are we still talking about that? It was an issue when I was Secretary of State.” It would be such a shame if in 20 years, when Carwyn Jones, the First Minister, is retired and in the House of Lords, a question was asked about the relief road around Newport, and Lord Jones of Bridgend leant across to whoever he was sat next to and said, “Are we still talking about that? I thought it had been dealt with during my time as First Minister.” It would be such a shame if nothing was done and people were still talking about the need for an urgent solution in 20 years.

My friendly message to colleagues of all parties in the Assembly is that we recognise that this is their decision to take, but I urge them to be bold and make a decision that is right for future generations, so we are not still talking about this decades from now. If we are not going to get the relief road built, and if the outcome of the current process is that the collective decision of the Welsh Government and Assembly Members of all parties is that it is too difficult and too controversial, and that they are going to kick the decision even further down the road, they need to be honest about that and about the consequences of that decision. Someone will probably have to walk up to the Prince of Wales bridge and plant a sign that says, “Wales is closed to future new business for the time being.”

2.50 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I apologise for needing to leave early, but I have to be in a Committee at 3.30 pm. I am really sorry that I will not be here for
the winding-up speeches. Other hon. Members from Wales are upstairs in a Delegated Legislation Committee at the moment, and I am sure they will come down when that is finished. Thank you for letting me contribute, Ms McDonagh.

I commend the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing this debate, not least because the issue is devolved to the Welsh Assembly, and therefore no hon. Member in this Chamber will have a vote on or a direct say over it. If we respect devolution—and I do—we must respect the fact that the Assembly and the Welsh Government will make the decision on relieving congestion on the M4. Although the UK Government grant borrowing powers, that borrowing will ultimately need to be repaid by taxpayers.

I have a close constituency interest in this issue. The right hon. Gentleman rightly spoke up for businesses in Preseli and for wider Welsh interests—it is clear that the whole of south Wales has an interest in this issue, and the solutions found in Cardiff to the well-documented and horrendous traffic issues will directly affect Newport and Severnside.

As all hon. Members will agree, the M4 around Newport is a route of strategic importance and critical to the Welsh economy, but it is also an absolute nightmare for many of my constituents and businesses to navigate. If there are serious incidents—and there are, frequently—they bring our part of south Wales to a halt, causing misery for people trying to get to and from work, and resulting in a big cost to business. I have constituents, family members and friends, as well as colleagues working in my office, who commute, so I understand the cost all too well.

The M4 motorway between Magor and Castleton does not meet modern motorway design standards, yet it carries a greater volume of traffic than it was designed for. Some sections of the motorway—particularly the Brynglas tunnels and junction 29 Castleton—regularly approach near-peak capacity. That does not just cost time and money, but has a big impact on air quality.

These long-standing, continuing problems need a solution that delivers an integrated and sustainable transport system in the long term. We have been discussing solutions for 30 years. The most recent public inquiry was held up because the Department for Transport changed the way it calculated traffic forecasts. We have had a public inquiry, and we are now waiting for Government officials to finish analysing the report. Everyone has had the chance to have their say about whether this project, alongside the south Wales metro, is a long-term sustainable solution. Bodies such as the CBI, the Institute of Directors, the South Wales chamber of commerce, the haulage industry and many more have made their views clear.

My constituents, businesses and campaign groups have also set out their positions. CALM—the Campaign Against the Levels Motorway—has argued against the M4 proposals on the grounds of cost, damage to the unique environment and climate change. For businesses such as Roadchef, which runs outlets at services, the problem is that there will be no westbound access if the black route goes ahead, which means no services for nearly 50 miles. Groups such as the Gwent Wildlife Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which have reserves in my constituency, describe the proposal as massively damaging for the unique wildlife and landscape. They say it is totally unsuitable and uneconomical, and that the route will destroy an irreplaceable and precious area of the Gwent levels forever.

The option outlined in the Welsh Government’s proposal is not easy and is costly. It will affect communities such as Magor, which have been blighted for many years, and run across sites of special scientific interest, but I recognise that alternative routes would bring even more traffic close to communities in the city of Newport.

The public inquiry has gathered all that evidence, and the inspector’s report is with Ministers. The Welsh Government have committed that the report will be open to scrutiny, debate and a vote by AMs before the final decision is made. It will then be up to those elected to the Welsh Assembly to make the decision. I do not envy them that, but that is the process. If the decision turns out to be no, alongside the no there will need to be a comprehensive plan, as demand for private and public transport is set to increase by at least 150% by 2030. We need something like the metro, but more of it and quickly. The south-east Wales metro can certainly help the process by providing the basis for modern, forward-looking and integrated public transport infrastructure for Gwent.

In my constituency, there has been a 103% increase in demand at the Severn Tunnel Junction railway station in the past decade. Services are overcrowded and unreliable, and commuters are frequently not able to board trains to work. Ministers can support the economy of south Wales and help my constituents get to work by addressing the issues they are actually responsible for and sorting out rail capacity on cross-border services. This issue is devolved, but cross-border services are in the Government’s hands.

On the question of addressing growing demand for public and private transport in south Wales, my Newport East colleague in the Assembly, John Griffiths, has spoken of the need for better traffic management to accompany new, better public transport. My other Newport Labour colleague, Jayne Bryant, AM for Newport West, rightly said that inaction is not an option and that doing nothing would be hugely costly for residents, businesses and commuters. They are both right.

People who regularly use the M4, and people who do not, want politicians to make an informed decision with all the facts at their disposal. I do not envy Assembly Members that decision, but I know they will make it with integrity after careful consideration.

2.56 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) and the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) for the way they put their points across.

No less a figure than the late Rhodri Morgan, former First Minister of Wales, described the M4 as the great infrastructure project in Wales of the 20th century. He recognised that the M4 is not just a matter of local convenience for people living in and around Newport; it also has a huge impact on the whole Welsh economy. Those of us from the Newport area know what it has
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate. I was in a Delegated Legislation Committee. The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point. Clearly, the road infrastructure around the east of Cardiff has a huge impact on my constituents. I consider myself an environmentalist. I want more investment in rail, cycling and pedestrian opportunities, but we have to recognise that there is an environmental consequence to all that traffic queuing into the east—particularly around Rover Way, Splott, Tremorfa and those eastern links. Does he agree that that can have a serious impact on air quality?

David T. C. Davies: Absolutely, I do agree. I am also an environmentalist who recognises that to protect the environment we have to generate the funds, and to generate funds we have to have a thriving economy. That is why, generally speaking, the western European and wealthier nations have a better environmental record than some of the poorer nations in the rest of Europe. I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point.

I am concerned not just about the increase in traffic that we will see as a result of the Conservative Government’s welcome decision to end the tolls on the Severn bridge—we will see the benefits of that only if this road is upgraded—but about the possibility of a major problem happening in the Brynglas tunnels, which would effectively shut the M4 and close off one of Wales’ major pieces of infrastructure. We need to have that alternative because the day will come when major work will have to be carried out in the Brynglas tunnels, and if there is no M4 relief road there when that happens the result could be absolutely devastating for the whole economy.

I very much hope that the Government in Wales get on with this. They have been given the powers and the money to do it. If they decide to go ahead I hope they will learn a few lessons from what has been going on slightly to the north where we have seen, I am afraid to say, a practice of Ministers turning up to be photographed in hard hats and high-vis vests for the dualling of the heads of the valleys road—a very welcome project—but not wanting to meet with residents who have been negatively affected by the work that has taken place.

Obviously, whenever a major piece of road infrastructure is built there will be inconvenience for local residents. It is important that those are recognised and dealt with by the responsible Ministers. I think we have agreed, on all sides, that there is a real problem here and there is a solution on the table. The only solution, I believe, is the black route. We have had experts poring over all the alternatives and we have had various people coming up with all sorts of schemes, involving trams and Lord knows what, but the reality is that there is only one scheme that will do it.

My understanding is that there are three candidates waiting to take over from the First Minister. Of those three, only one has given a 100% commitment to building this route. I hope that the Minister will do everything possible to ensure that the Welsh Government have all the power and money they need to build that road, and encourage them to do so as quickly as possible, given the welcome decision his Department has made about the tolls.

I urge my friends opposite, if I may call them that, to do whatever they can to influence the result of their own election and make sure that the candidate who wins is the one who is going to build this road. I am absolutely convinced that after the next Welsh Assembly election we are going to end Labour party rule in Wales. We are going to get rid of one-party rule and we are going to have a Conservative First Minister, but the M4 relief road cannot wait for that. Since we are going to end up with a Labour First Minister, we might as well have one who is going to take one very useful decision.

Guto Bebb: I express my support as a north Wales MP. Quite often in Wales, we have the argument that all the funding goes down south, but the view in north Wales is that we will not see major updates to the A55 until this project is off the ground. The view in north Wales is that if we are going to have the improvements to the A55 that we need, we need to see the decision taken on the M4 relief road sooner rather than later.

David T. C. Davies: I thank my hon. Friend and simply add that road building is absolutely vital to the economy. I will certainly be supporting the A55.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving a superb speech, as always. It would be a pity if mid-Wales were left out, if north Wales is being mentioned. One might wonder why an MP for mid-Wales is keen to see the M4 relief road happen. Last week, a haulier from mid-Wales described to me how, because of the Brynglas tunnels, most of his drivers now have to go up to Abergavenny, across to Merthyr Tydfil and down to Carmarthenshire, before going back on to the main road to get to west Wales. That is putting extra burden on other parts of Wales. This relief road is long overdue and I hope we will see it come forward very shortly.
David T. C. Davies: A good speech usually requires a good peroration and two of them have now been blown out of the water. I very much hope those drivers are using HGV sat nav, not ones designed for cars, so they are not responsible for driving straight through the centre of Abergavenny, which is causing a separate pollution problem.

What can I say? I have said it all. That road needs building as soon as possible and I very much hope that heads will be put together in all parts of the House—and on both sides of the River Severn—to sort this out as quickly as possible.

3.4 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on opening today’s debate and enabling a strong debate on the urgent need for transport investment in south Wales.

The right hon. Gentleman represents a beautiful peninsula in south Wales and a vital transport corridor, which I have no doubt will be in more demand following the UK’s leaving the EU; but without the right infrastructure in place, it could result in a massive impact on his constituency and throughout the south Wales corridor. This level of detail has been ill-conceived by the Government. As 29 March next year is rapidly approaching, I urge the Minister to ensure that the risk analysis for all parts of his portfolio, including the impact in south Wales, is clearly attended to.

My fear is that the Prime Minister’s plans will not contain anywhere near the level of detail needed, whenever we get to see them—maybe later today. I have also heard a real call for better connectivity to the whole of south Wales, and rightly so, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). We know that the Welsh economy has been seriously challenged by poor connectivity, and that recent decisions made in Westminster—not in the Senedd—have had the worst impact, not least on rail.

We will never forget how in 2017, the day after Parliament rose for the summer recess, the Secretary of State snuck out the announcement that he would cancel the rail electrification project in south Wales. That would have been a game changer to all communities in the region and would have enabled faster, cleaner and more efficient rail services to the valleys and conurbations. However, in writing off south Wales he has singly made the most detrimental decision to stem the potential of the Welsh economy and sustain a transportation challenge in the region.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend makes the point about the cancellation of electrification beyond Cardiff. Does she share my concern about the delays that there have been to the electrification as far as Cardiff? We have seen that put off again and again, with delay after delay. People are enduring really poor service on the Great Western main line, which has a huge impact on transport infrastructure.

Rachael Maskell: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I feel great pain as he speaks about the delays in improving the railway network. The situation is unsustainable. We should be investing in high-quality digital rail, which would build far more capacity across the network, as well as upgrading rail networks through electrification projects. That is why I believe that people in Wales will focus on this issue at the ballot box at the next election.

I want to put it on record today that Labour, in government, in Westminster, is fully committed to expansion of electrification and digital rail projects in south Wales. We believe in optimising every economic opportunity for the population of Wales. Further, our renationalisation programme for rail will be a serious game changer for all rail operations across Wales, including those in the M4 corridor, both in Wales and leading into England. That connectivity will move forward the economy in that part of the country.

I now turn to the wider transport brief. It was so important for me to start my contribution with a focus on rail because connectivity is not about segregated transport systems, with rail in one silo and roads in another, as the Government place them; it is about a joined-up approach to ensure that business, commuter and leisure passenger movements can be made with maximum ease and minimum expense. Labour has clearly set out how we will put a real emphasis on bringing about modal shift, helping to decongest our roads and create greater reliability. The sheer misery—which we have borne witness to in today’s debate—of those using the strategic road network in Wales has been palpable. It will be important, therefore, for the Minister to tell us how he will provide short-term relief for that, as well as long-term solutions.

In an age when climate change is having a devastating impact on our planet, and when cars are logjammed on our roads, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), the current situation is polluting our atmosphere today and causing major air quality problems to residents along the M4 corridor. We know that that hits the most deprived communities the worst. We need an urgent resolve to get quick relief.

The current proposal for a 14-mile stretch of road around the south of Newport is expected to cost around £1.4 billion. Since 2016, the proposal, which has been on and off the table for the best part of 30 years, has been the subject of consultation, with the final decision to be made in the coming months. The public consultation closed this spring. The so-called black route has been the preferred route and the Welsh Government have stated that it is vital that the route resolves issues of capacity, safety and resilience along the M4 corridor in south-east Wales. As with any road project, clearly strong arguments will be made on all sides—and I have read them—both on the economic and transportation challenges and on the environmental case.

Some £50 million has already been offered to offset the carbon cost of the project. There is recognition that the project will have a serious environmental impact, as we have heard today. We would be disingenuous, therefore, if we did not all recognise that it is a difficult decision. On the one hand, we have pollution as a result of congestion, delays as a result of queues, and 100,000 vehicles using the route every single day. There is an urgent need for better transportation—better connectivity between sea, rail and active travel—and there is an opportunity to be grasped. For every £1 spent we will see £2 returned to
the economy. Perhaps the greatest prize will be the 300 accidents that the project prevents. We cannot wait until 2023 to see that number fall dramatically.

On the other hand, there is serious environmental concern. We are familiar with the evidence highlighting the impact of induced capacity, which draws vehicles on to major routes, causing them to become a source of major pollution and future congestion. The Welsh Labour Government have done more than any other to impact-assess their policies against that, through the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. The figure that perhaps we should all focus on, here in Westminster and in the Senedd in Wales, is that the project is cited as becoming carbon-neutral by 2072. With nations that face catastrophic consequences, every decision we take must also seek to enhance our climate and focus on the humanitarian consequences. I know that such concern will be at the forefront of the Welsh Government’s thoughts as they conclude their deliberations.

3.11 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this debate on financial support for upgrading the M4 in south Wales. Given today’s news, I think everyone in this Chamber shares my view that we should salute the integrity and quality of the Clerk of the House of Commons, but we should no less salute my right hon. Friend’s ingenuity in managing to get this debate past the Clerks and into the Westminster Hall Chamber so that we can discuss it.

As my right hon. Friend will know, upgrading the M4 around Newport is the responsibility of the Welsh Government, so I am sure that he and other colleagues around the Chamber will understand my extreme care and circumspection in addressing this issue. It has to be said, and he has said, that upgrading the M4 has been identified by businesses and commuters as a priority for many years. Business organisations have made clear that uncertainty around the project is affecting business across south Wales and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) mentioned, mid-Wales.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire was instrumental, when he was Secretary of State for Wales, in steering the Wales Act 2014 through this House, providing the Welsh Government with capital borrowing powers to help to deliver improvements to Wales’s infrastructure and the M4 in particular, given their potential to boost economic growth and ease congestion. The Welsh Government have requested an extension to their borrowing powers to fund the M4 improvements, and I am sure hon. Members across the Chamber—indeed, we have been a little unclear in some respects about the degree of support from Opposition Members; perhaps they would like to clarify that—will therefore welcome the Chancellor’s announcement at Budget that there will be a review of the Welsh Government’s capital borrowing powers to support the delivery of a proposed relief road.

The review will consider whether the borrowing cap should be increased by up to £300 million to support this vital project. The UK Government have thus provided the Welsh Government with the levers that they have told us they need to deliver a new motorway. If the Welsh Government wish to deliver that motorway, now is the time for them to do so.

At Budget, the Chancellor also announced that from 2020 to 2025, £28.8 billion will be invested in England’s road infrastructure via the national roads fund, of which £25.3 billion will be spent via the second road investment strategy, RIS2, the rest being invested into large local major road schemes and the newly conceived major road network. This represents a pivotal moment for the future of roads in England, allowing the UK Government to continue to develop a long-term vision for those roads. Part of that vision, of course, must be working with the Welsh Government to identify where our priorities meet, join and can best be collectively exploited. The border between Wales and England, as I know full well from my constituency, is crossed by a number of important road links, and both Governments will feel the need to ensure that their investment decisions in this area take account of the needs of road users on both sides of the border.

I will also discuss the abolition of the Severn tolls from 17 December. The Severn bridge and the Prince of Wales bridge are vital pieces of cross-border infrastructure, which Highways England manages for the benefit of both nations. More than 80,000 vehicles cross the bridges every day. The end of tolling on these bridges will support motorists, local residents and cross-border business across Wales and the west of England. I think I am right in saying that the Welsh Government supported that decision, and I welcome their support.

The decision will help to transform the economy in the region, putting over £1,400 a year back into the pockets of families and delivering a boost to the economies of south Wales and south-west England. It will also alleviate congestion on the bridges. Road users will no longer have to stop to pay the tolls, which can cause queues during busy periods.

However, I do recognise that there are concerns that the removal of tolls will cause an increase in traffic at the crossings and on other roads in the area, as more people will be able to afford to cross the border in both directions to seek job and trade opportunities. I want to reassure right hon. and hon. Members that our analysis shows that the bridges have sufficient capacity to cope with the traffic growth forecast, but if there is a knock-on effect on the M4 at Newport, it can only strengthen the case for a relief road, especially since the Welsh Government have supported the decision to end the tolling. We will also continue to work with the Welsh Government to manage the impact of the abolition of the tolls on the road networks on both sides of the border.

Technical analysis by Highways England, working with other highways authorities and local business organisations, suggests that the initial impact on traffic conditions away from the crossing will be limited. There are a number of congestion hotspots near the crossing, and to some extent the problem there may be exacerbated. As part of the autumn 2016 statement, an additional £220 million to tackle pinch points on the network was announced, of which the south-west has been allocated £32.1 million for this roads period, from 2015 to 2020, but the Government are also looking at the investment needs of the south-west as part of RIS2.
Picking up on some of the themes mentioned today, I must say that there is a need for clarification: it is true that people in political parties either side of the border wish to support this relief road, then now is the moment for them to make that position public and clear, without equivocation, bearing in mind all the other considerations that have been mentioned in the debate. On the basis of the discussion we have had, I look forward to the Welsh Government’s forthcoming debate on improving the M4, and to hearing how they will deliver the improvements that the people and businesses of Wales seek.

3.17 pm

Stephen Crabb: I do not intend to take the full 43 minutes remaining in this debate to sum up. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated. I offer my thanks and appreciation again to the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson and the Minister for their interest in this debate. I particularly thank the Minister for the pragmatic and co-operative approach that I know he takes in his dealings with the Welsh Government, and recognise the way that the wider Department works with the Welsh Government.

This has been a useful debate. We have recognised that the key decision on whether to go ahead with the M4 upgrade is for Welsh Assembly Members and the Welsh Government alone, but we also recognise the key role that the UK Government play in terms of the request for further financial borrowing powers, on which the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the UK Government will have to take a decision.

In response to the point made by the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson about electrification, I have commented on that issue in another place. On the question of public transport, the truth is that we need the M4 upgrade and better public transport across south Wales; it is not an either/or. The people and businesses in Newport need public transport alternatives, but that strategic transport corridor, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) said, links the west coast of Ireland with eastern Europe, deserves a decent motorway that meets modern standards. It does not have that at the moment, and that is creating problems for the Welsh economy.

We are at a moment that requires a difficult and challenging decision from the Welsh Government, but my hope is that they will make the right decision in the interest of future generations of Welsh people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial support for the upgrading of the M4 in South Wales.

3.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

4 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future cost of Hinkley Point.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

To start with, may I praise the Minister for coming down to Hinkley Point with the Secretary of State and having an excellent visit, which went down extremely well at C station? This afternoon, I am delighted to celebrate the progress of Britain’s first nuclear power station in a whole generation. Hinkley C is absolutely smack in the middle of my constituency and it is important to the local economy. Indeed, the importance of its development cannot be overestimated. It is a huge project that has already cost—I say this so that people are aware—billions of pounds.

The subject of my debate—the future cost of Hinkley Point—has raised eyebrows, including, I think, those of the Minister. I want to make it clear that the investment will pay substantial dividends for decades to come. Hon. Members should need no reminding that every penny of the price to complete Hinkley is coming from the developers. The exact amount, believe it or not, is £20 billion, plus an additional £300,000; I do not know what the £300,000 is for, but there you are.

There is no public money at stake; the venture is financed with EDF’s euros and a small portion of Chinese yuan. The risk takers are two of the world’s biggest nuclear players. They have the backing of their own Governments, and they are big enough and robust enough to battle it out with the best—and, importantly, win. Hinkley is definitely a win-win construction for us in Bridgwater and West Somerset.

Hinkley is already providing thousands of new employment opportunities and sowing the seeds for world-class nuclear training at Bridgwater and Taunton College; the Minister was able to see a small part of that. Hinkley is attracting talent from all over Britain, but EDF is rightly proud of the fact that so many of its keen young recruits have been found within just a few miles of the site. Perhaps that is not surprising, as there has been a nuclear power station at Hinkley Point for 61 years. Entire generations have lived with, and worked in, Hinkley and learned to rely on it. Nuclear power commands enormous respect in my part of the world; it is in our blood. We know that it makes sense, now more than ever before.

The necessity of additional electricity generation in these islands is not in question. All our remaining coal-fired power stations, and there are only seven of them now, are carbon-guzzling—dare I say it? I mean this in the right way—museum pieces that we have agreed to commit to history over the next six years.

Most of the UK’s electricity is produced by burning fossil fuels, mainly natural gas. That is both wasteful and costly, particularly to the environment. Gas-fired power stations amount to 40% of UK power generation. Wind and solar already provide roughly 28% of the
nation’s needs; that is, of course, whenever the wind blows and the weather allows it. Our old fleet of nuclear power stations appear to be trailing, as they supply just 19%. That leaves a gap that can be filled only by importing power from France and the Netherlands via cables, which is hardly ideal when we stand on the brink of Brexit. In other words, we are not running on empty, but we need some quick fixes to make sure the lights stay on.

The golden advantage of nuclear power is that it produces electricity even if the sun does not shine and the wind stops blowing—surprise, surprise. It also involves a highly skilled workforce, which, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) knows so well; he is my next-door neighbour. However, that is the way that companies such as EDF work; they are in it for the long term. Planning a new power station takes years; building it will take a decade. Nothing in life is perfect, but in my humble opinion, nuclear power is pretty darn good.

What has happened in my constituency is nothing short of revolutionary, and I know that the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) has also experienced such benefits. Bridgwater used to be an avoidable town in many ways, with a lot of factories making things such as cellophane, with its unforgettable smell—I know you have never suffered it, Mr Hollobone, but I can assure you that it was interesting—as well as water pumps, believe it or not, and, yes, we were the home of bombs. The material for the famous bouncing bombs used by the RAF in the dam buster raids was actually made in Bridgwater.

Our town is used to getting its hands dirty and it has a highly skilled workforce, which, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) knows so well; he is my next-door neighbour. Then, however, we had severe recessions. The bomb factory closed and the cellophane plant shut; the little industries began to thin out and melt away. I invite all hon. Members here to come and see Hinkley C. It is quite remarkable. It is the right place is by using 3D modelling. Also, major parts are prefabricated away from the site, to minimise disruption and increase productivity. As a result, EDF has done the digging 15% quicker than anywhere else, laid concrete 30% faster, and actually cut out mistakes, which is a remarkable achievement.

Most importantly, there are jobs—lots of them. They are good, skilled, long-lasting jobs. There is also a fully functioning national college that has developed to teach new nuclear skills to the next generation. Much praise is due to the present and past principals of Bridgwater and Taunton College, who have helped to put in place a world-class education programme and forge links with major employers.

At last, there are proper careers in an industry that may have been around for 60 years, but has come back to Bridgwater with renewed vigour. That is the reality. That is what can happen; and it will continue to happen when the reactors are completed. When they are switched on, we will see the proof of what we have achieved.

At that point, Hinkley C will meet up to 7% of all of Britain’s electricity needs. That may not sound much, but let us put it in perspective. Hinkley will be able to power 299 million light bulbs at once; it will also allow 58 million people to watch “Bake Off” at the same time, hopefully—boom, boom!—without a soggy bottom. [Interruption.] I know—sorry. If any teenagers arrive home in the middle of the show, Hinkley will still be able to fill up the batteries of 640 million iPhones without any bother at all.

I am, as Members have probably gathered, a nuclear enthusiast. I have watched the progress of Hinkley throughout 17 long years in Parliament—they have been long—during which time EDF developed its plans, invested in detailed research, and patiently consulted and worked with local authorities, especially Sedgemoor District Council. EDF has had its critics, but nobody can fault its extraordinary patience over a very long period. It has waited and not been frustrated by Prime Ministers, past or present, who could or would not take the decision to go nuclear—and they all did that.

By the time the Government gave the green light, EDF had actually sunk £2 billion of its own money into the project, which might have been cancelled overnight. However, that is the way that companies such as EDF work; they are in it for the long term. Planning a new power station takes years; building it will take a decade.

Understandably, EDF is still learning lessons about how to build more efficiently. However, if one were to consider the progress already made on the site in less than three years, one might wonder if any additional improvements were possible. Believe it or not, EDF is using 3D modelling on a massive scale, to take the worry out of getting major engineering decisions spot-on. It has already sunk 235,000 steel bars into concrete, and the best way to ensure that those bars are in precisely the right place is by using 3D modelling. Also, major parts are prefabricated away from the site, to minimise disruption and increase productivity. As a result, EDF has done the digging 15% quicker than anywhere else, laid concrete 30% faster, and actually cut out mistakes, which is a remarkable achievement.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has represented his constituents so well on so many issues, and we join on this. I am grateful to him for his thoughts. I am also very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wells, who has supported Hinkley since he has been an MP. He has made an enormous contribution; indeed, both my colleagues have.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Hinkley Point is in his constituency, which neighbours mine, and I have also been to see the site. I can say just how impressive it is; everything that he has described is correct. Does he agree that Hinkley Point not only generates vital baseload electricity, but boosts the local economy in our constituencies and those of other hon. Friends who are here—and not only during this construction phase? When it is operational, that will continue. The boost to employment and the local economy in North Devon and throughout the area will be considerable.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He has represented his constituents so well on so many issues, and we join on this. I am grateful to him for his thoughts. I am also very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wells, who has supported Hinkley since he has been an MP. He has made an enormous contribution; indeed, both my colleagues have.

The point my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon makes is absolutely right. The opportunities for learning and gaining skills in our area are really quite phenomenal. Exmoor is perhaps not—dare I say it?—the richest area, but it has already benefited from Hinkley Point, even though it is a long way away. That means that we are able to spread out the goodies of Hinkley Point, not only to our neighbours, but to a much bigger area.
Mr Liddell-Grainger: I give way to the hon. Member for Wylfa.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: The hon. Gentleman has made an enormous contribution to the nuclear debate, and I am grateful to him. He is absolutely correct. I am also delighted to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) in his place.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) quite right: at the end of the day, this is a team effort. No nuclear area is doing anything other than what all nuclear areas are trying to do, whether in Dungeness, Wylfa, Hartlepool, or anywhere else. We are trying to work together to spread the benefits of nuclear across the United Kingdom, and we have to get that right for the communities. Hinkley is the first of these projects, but that does not mean it will be the last: Sizewell is next, then Wylfa, and then we will go wherever we are going, whether that is Sellafield, or somewhere else. The Government have to make a decision, as I will discuss a little bit later, and I am sure that the Minister will pick up on this exchange. We need a clear understanding of the business rates over the long term, as there has to be some mechanism that brings the benefits of the nuclear production of electricity back to the local community.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Just two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet a representative of one of the power companies involved in this project, and he outlined the benefits to the economy in terms of jobs and the pound in your pocket. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) said, this is about involvement with the community? It is not a question of them and us. Rather, it is about how companies involve themselves with and endear themselves to communities, and encourage them. It is obvious from the presentation I saw that there will be great benefits to the local economy, but this is about community involvement and making sure that communities benefit directly.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank the hon. Gentleman; I know this is not his area of expertise, but he is absolutely right. I reiterate that this is a team effort, and the whole of the United Kingdom must benefit from it. It is iniquitous that we are buying electricity from France and the Netherlands; we should be producing our own electricity for our own people. The jobs and skills are interchangeable: the skills that a person learns as a steel fixer, a concrete pourer, an electrician, or anything else at Hinkley can enable them to go anywhere in the United Kingdom. Those people are trained to the highest level of engineering that we can achieve. The only thing that they cannot do is welding the nuclear flask, but they can do everything else, and that is important for our area.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a delight to contribute to my hon. Friend’s debate, as he contributed to my debate on broadband yesterday. There is huge opportunity in Somerset for upskilling of individuals, and for businesses to upgrade their capabilities in order to contribute to the nuclear supply chain. It is important that those individuals and businesses are able to access the Hinkley programme, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is equally important that the industrial strategy for our region helps to deliver follow-on industries in Somerset and the south-west, so that those skills can be employed within our region, rather than seeing them move on with the nuclear caravan when the nuclear new build programme moves elsewhere in the United Kingdom?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend; he has been an incredible advocate for nuclear, and has worked tirelessly. This has not been easy, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are creating something for the future, and it is going well. The Minister is fully aware of that, and of how much work has been done locally, both in North Devon and in Somerset.

For every nuclear job, we must create a non-nuclear one. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) covers Burnham and Highbridge—it is in his constituency, and on the border of mine—and it is important that we create jobs in Morrisons distributions, Wiseman’s milk, Yeo Valley dairy products and Mulberry handbags. The development at ROF Bridgewater in Puriton, the bomb factory, is 626 acres of industrial space, right on our joint border. We are making strides to ensure we keep that legacy going for generations to come. The Minister has been briefed on that, and is fully aware of it.

Some 95% of everything at Hinkley C is delivered right on time, which is an amazing statistic for an engineering job on this scale, and lends credibility to EDF’s belief that the next power station built in the UK can be done 20% quicker and cheaper than Hinkley. That is a phenomenal statistic. The cost of Hinkley C, as far as the British Government are concerned and as we all know, is locked into something called a strike price: how much we are prepared to pay for every volt generated. The price was agreed several years ago, and some people argue that it is high, but Hinkley was never planned to be a one-off. EDF is already well advanced with plans for Sizewell C, on the Essex coast, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wells has been a great advocate for that as well. That development will be, in effect, Hinkley C mark 2. It will offer the same job opportunities, as well as economies of scale, supply, licensing, and design. Those savings are likely to be reflected in the price that EDF receives for the electricity produced, but the financial risk—and this is important—remains primarily EDF’s, not ours. The experience of Hinkley C in Somerset continues to be critical for Britain’s nuclear future.

Hinkley could not have proceeded without the intelligent local authority support of Sedgemoor District Council, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and I share.
It was the council that negotiated the generous compensation from EDF; and we know that that there will be a community financial benefit when the plant starts generating power, because the Government have already promised it. It would be helpful if the Minister could provide some pointers about that; I realise that it is early days, but a bit more flesh on the bones is always helpful from any quarter, and the council and many others—including my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and I—would be very interested to hear about it. It was Sedgemoor that insisted on sensible traffic management, and Sedgemoor that smoothed out the planning obstacles without, most importantly, surrendering proper oversight. As I hope my hon. Friend would agree, Sedgemoor has been an exemplary council.

James Heappey: I do.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend assents from a sedentary position. Sedgemoor has significant experience, which all other English councils will wish to imitate when they deal with nuclear plants in the future, and I know that Sedgemoor would be happy to help. I just wish that Somerset County Council had the same enviable reputation. The unions at Hinkley tell me that there is now real concern about Somerset County Council’s financial problems and the impact those could have on Hinkley C. I realise that this is not the Minister’s direct responsibility, but it is important that he hears it. Somerset County Council is severely stretched; actually, it is almost broke. It is about to make savage cuts to essential public services, and it cannot afford—to it says—to finance new schools. There are also worries about threats to the learning and skills service. Hinkley’s job opportunities are attracting families to settle locally, which means a housing boom for our area and our county, but it could mean a crisis if there are not enough schools or public services.

I know that the Government are being lobbied hard by Somerset County Council, and badgered by its leader, to create a new unitary authority. This is not the time or the place to analyse what has gone wrong, but Somerset County Council’s attitude, I am afraid, is not helpful. It is already blaming Sedgemoor District Council for allowing too many new houses, which is absolute madness. As the Hinkley unions emphasise, where are the thousands of nuclear workers expected to live? That point has been made in this debate by hon. Members from all over the UK. I do not believe that incompetent financial management of the county should put any part of Hinkley’s future at risk. That would be bad for the United Kingdom, as the economic rewards of Hinkley are far too important to us all.

I have just returned from China, which I visited with a group of colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group on nuclear energy. We were guests of EDF’s Chinese partners, CGN. Its engineers have worked hand in hand with EDF to develop as a major nuclear player, as well as develop its own reactors, and we were taken to see the working EPR in Taishan. It is very good; it does the job that CGN set out for it to do. While we were away, we heard the sad news that Toshiba was abandoning its plans to build a new reactor at Moorside, near Sellafield. We know that Toshiba has been facing financial problems, but the potential loss of any new plant anywhere in the country is obviously serious.

The future cost of Hinkley, and all nuclear installations that follow, will be high. In the specialist field of energy production, quality, long life, efficiency and safety will not come cheap at the moment, but they will become cheaper. I thank the Minister for all his support.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is, as always, a great pleasure to serve under your very competent chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, as I have many times. I hope that the rest of the debate will not be too stressful for you, given the spirit in which my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) intends it, for which I thank him. He has consistently and regularly demonstrated a keen interest in the Hinkley Point C project—formally, at the meetings we have had together, and on visits, and more or less every time I have a cup of tea or coffee in his immediate vicinity. I congratulate him on that.

I also congratulate the other hon. Members who contributed to the debate: my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen)—it took some time to learn that constituency, but I think I know it now—and, of course, the ubiquitous hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), who is also a regular contributor, taught me something that conditioned my view of Hinkley Point and other projects when I had just taken on the portfolio. He told me about his fear that the local content would comprise, basically, a sandwich van at the end of the site. I say that because my hon. Friend. Friend for Bridgwater and West Somerset talked about wet bottoms.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: Soggy bottoms.

Richard Harrington: I shall have to check Hansard. I appreciate your leniency, Mr Hollobone—I am sure Mr Speaker might have thought that was unparliamentary language, but it was not intended to be so.

The serious point I am making is that in all my dealings with EDF, and in all my visits down there and visits to suppliers, I am always keen to stress the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wells about the local supply chain, and the fact that these are real jobs. That reflects the points made about the national impact, which we always have to think about.

I am proud to be part of this Government and I asked for the nuclear portfolio—not because it was part of my general energy portfolio, but because I believe it is a brilliant industry in its own right for the future. It has everything that we look for in our industrial strategy: quite apart from the energy side, the industry creates good-quality, high-level employment, and that energy, if produced in bulk—obviously, not hundreds and hundreds of these, but more than one—can reduce the price by 30%. It also has supply chain and export, and is high tech. Before we even get on to the green point, the baseload point and all the other things that are so important, it has a lot going for it.

That is why I was pleased when the Secretary of State and I went to—I must warn you, Mr Hollobone, that this could be difficult for me to pronounce—Trawsfynydd,
in Snowdonia in north Wales, to launch our nuclear sector deal. The hon. Member for Ynys Môn nodded, so I am pleased I got the pronunciation right. It has a great future. We have mentioned different parts of the country today, including north Wales and Wylfa, which are important.

Indeed, the hon. Gentleman and I have discussed community benefits for Anglesey. Obviously, the community benefits for Hinkley Point are further down the line because the development is well under way. Those are important community benefits and it is right that those decisions should be made locally. Of course, that can lead the Government into lots of problems, because local communities do not have a consistent view, depending on area.

Albert Owen: The question I raised regarding the announcement made in 2013 by the then Department of Energy and Climate Change still stands, and I know that the communities of Bridgwater and of Anglesey are concerned that nothing much has happened since then. Will the Minister reiterate his commitment to that formula so that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Welsh Government can work with his Department, the mechanism can be put in place and, when the stations are generating, the communities can get the full benefits?

Richard Harrington: I am happy to confirm that. I have already met with one chief executive and one lead councillor from the hon. Gentleman’s area, but I would, of course, be delighted to discuss this with him at any time.

The main point today, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset expressed so eloquently, is how important the nuclear industry is as an industry in its own right to local economies and to the national economy. As far as I can see, EDF is doing an excellent job. There are many British and Northern Irish employees, some of whom I met down there, of different skill levels, and I was pleased to see the number of young girl apprentices, which is also part of our nuclear sector deal.

I am not at all complacent. I think the deal struck at Hinkley Point C was sensible from the taxpayer’s point of view, as my hon. Friend mentioned, because it completely de-risked the taxpayer. We can do other interesting deals in the future for nuclear. At the moment, nuclear power is roughly 22% to 24% of the power output that we need. By 2030 to 2040, as the original power stations are decommissioned or reach the end of their life, that will drop with Hinkley to—again, these are very rough numbers—5% to 7%. There is a big gap.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the true value—that might have been a better title than “cost”—of the Hinkley project will not be known until we see some of the cost savings that will be realised at the second station that EDF has built, and indeed in the sequencing of stations that will be built after that?

Richard Harrington: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, with which I fully agree. On my first visit to Sellafield I was shown the original Calder Hall reactors that were opened in the ’60s. The then Minister said that the electricity would be so cheap that it was not even worth metering it. We have moved away from that, but I believe that, in the long term, this will be low-cost power. As everyone knows, the up-front costs are significant. After that, the marginal costs are comparatively low. As long as there is a reasonable way to finance the up-front costs—which, as the technology becomes more modular and more commoditised, we will be able to estimate more accurately—I totally agree with my right hon. Friend’s point.

I am pleased to respond to today’s debate. I will not forget Hinkley Point C, which is one of the most significant visits I have ever made. It is calculated that 64% of the construction contracts there—it is a huge project—will go to UK companies, and that £4 billion will go into the regional economy over the lifetime of the project. We will not forget that; it is very important to us. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset for bringing the debate to the Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.
Shared Prosperity Fund: Wales

4.28 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered Wales and the Shared Prosperity Fund.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I welcome the new Minister from the Wales Office; I think this is his first official appearance at the Dispatch Box. He will find us a welcoming but challenging bunch in Wales. I am sure that we will have a good debate, and that his noble Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), will look after him just as well as he has looked after the Minister’s many predecessors.

One of the extraordinary aspects of the Government’s approach to Brexit is their failure to address some of the fundamental reasons for the leave vote before the act of leaving. Obviously there is a lot happening as we speak on that issue, but on major areas of policy—such as immigration policy—we still do not know what the Government propose for the post-Brexit world. A hugely important area that they are not speaking about is the UK priorities, and with the shared prosperity fund. Does he not appreciate that as we leave the EU we need that move to regional funding, which we will address today. I hope that this will be the beginning of a debate about changes to regional funding that takes into account the views of Members right across the United Kingdom and right across Wales—this is a very important subject in Wales.

It is true that Wales has been one of the major beneficiaries of EU structural funding. Between 2014 and 2020, west Wales and the valleys will have benefited from investment of more than £2 billion from the European Union.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. My constituency in the valleys has benefited enormously from structural funding. Does he agree that one of the problems with UK priorities, and with the shared prosperity fund, is that areas that have benefited have no guarantee of benefiting to the same extent in the future?

Ian C. Lucas: Absolutely. Certain areas of Wales have benefited much more than others. East Wales received £406 million in investment between 2014 and 2020—a lot less than west Wales and the valleys. Investment is determined by rules set at EU level that govern the distribution of state aid and are intended to compensate for regional disparities.

Since the 1980s, one of the fundamental drivers of the UK national economy has been the inexorable rise of south-east England. The huge investment that it has received at the expense of the rest of the country has had a long-term negative effect on many of the areas that we represent. EU structural funds have gone some way towards compensating for its dominance, but have failed to check it altogether or to bring about a fairer long-term distribution of wealth and investment across the UK. If we are leaving the EU, we need that move to achieve a benefit for our constituents in the future. It is imperative that a system is put in place to benefit the regions of the UK that have been left behind by economic development.

It is unfortunate that notwithstanding the importance of the issue, the Government have given very little indication of how the UK regional prosperity fund will operate. I do not believe that they have even given a commitment that the amount of money distributed to Wales will not fall. I have asked the Secretary of State for that assurance and for more detail on what the fund’s rules will be, but I have had very little information from the Government. It is high time for it, because we are at a hugely important moment and lots of businesses and organisations in all our constituencies are interested in exactly what will happen. Will the Government please answer some of our questions?

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that many regeneration projects in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and across Wales simply would not have happened without EU structural funds? That makes it all the more important that we get some certainty about the prosperity fund. Wales needs to play a part in how the fund is managed.

Ian C. Lucas: Certainty is something that all our constituents and all the businesses in our constituencies crave, but it has been sadly lacking in the period since 2016, so I would like the Minister to provide some in his début today. First, can he assure us that Wales will not receive less in funding under the new UK regional prosperity fund than it does under EU structural funds? Secondly, and importantly, will the rules of the UK prosperity fund be set at UK level, with the same rules applying across the devolved nations and regions? Will there be any difference between rules in Scotland, in the regions of England, in Wales and in Northern Ireland, or will the rules apply in the same way as the current EU rules?

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I think we all welcome the fact that a prosperity fund is to be created. Following on from my hon. Friend’s argument, does he accept that the sensible and most effective thing would be for the Welsh section of the fund to be administered by the Welsh Government? That would ensure that the fund enhances the work that the Welsh Government have already conducted.

Ian C. Lucas: My hon. Friend must have read my speech on the quiet, because my next question is who will administer the fund—will it be administered by the UK Government or by the devolved bodies?

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very interesting speech, but does he not see the advantage of having the UK shared prosperity fund administered centrally, to ensure that it has the depth and breadth to fund the projects that are needed around the United Kingdom? For example, tidal power schemes may need more than the amount that would be allocated on a devolved nation basis. Secondly, does he not appreciate that as we leave the European Union, it is a good time for Members of this House to strengthen our own Union by advocating that projects be funded directly here in Westminster?

Ian C. Lucas: It is interesting, isn’t it? The EU rules apply EU-wide, so there is a certain logic in a UK prosperity fund having UK rules that apply across a single market within the United Kingdom. I would not want a race to the bottom as a result of rules being applied differently in different countries of the
United Kingdom, so I understand the argument for applying a single set of rules so that we do not have state aid in one area being weighed against another—just as the same general EU rules have applied across the UK despite devolution.

This debate is an important one, but we have not had it yet. That was a big mistake, because we could have spent the past 18 months or two years discussing these hugely important issues. I would like that to start today, and I will be very interested to hear the contributions of colleagues.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this is important. The issue is of concern to local authorities and further education colleges in north Wales, but does he agree that, as a result of the efforts to get the north Wales growth deal on board, it is at least being discussed by the relevant stakeholders there? It is therefore a very opportune moment to ensure that comments made in north Wales are listened to, both in Westminster and in Cardiff Bay.

Ian C. Lucas: The hon. Gentleman has read my speech, too—I was planning to go on to the north Wales growth deal. I am passionate about regional policy and devolving powers to the nations and regions, but the Government should be giving a lead. It is their responsibility to compensate for market failures with engineering investment to improve a part of our economy that the market on its own would leave behind.

There is agreement across the political spectrum that the present system has not worked as it should for the benefit of all the nations and regions of the UK. We need to reflect on the result of the referendum and ask why investment from the structural funds, for example, has not achieved as much as we would all have liked.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Surely the best way to ensure the best possible outcomes for our programmes and projects is to decentralise and devolve, empowering local authorities, local stakeholders and the practitioners who will ultimately deliver the projects to design measures and outputs. The people on the ground know best what works and what does not.

Ian C. Lucas: That is my next paragraph, which I shall read. As someone who believes in devolved decision making, I believe that decisions relating to investment in Wrexham and north Wales should be made by people who are close to our local economy and community. Historically, the EU’s structural funds system did not work well for my constituency of Wrexham.

Let me give one example. Wrexham Glyndwr University was established in 2008—the first time in our history that we had a university. That was a strategic moment for Wrexham and hugely important. As I said when I was a Minister within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, universities are at the centre of developing economies in the modern world. The establishment of Wrexham Glyndwr University was a really important period, but between 2008 and 2014 it received no structural funds at all. The Wales European Funding Office tells us that, in the same period, Swansea University received £89 million, the University of Glamorgan £41 million, Cardiff University £29 million and Bangor University £47 million. There was a lack of investment from the source that was supposed to be supporting the development of the economy in the area that I represent.

That was a missed opportunity and will have had a negative impact on the university that we are developing as part of the local economy.

That lack of investment is mirrored in funding for north-east Wales generally. Neath Port Talbot Council received over £89 million between 2007 and 2014, while Flintshire received £3 million. Incredibly, Wrexham received only £446,000. After Brexit, we will need a new system of funding and a fair allocation across Wales. As the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) said, we have shown the way in north Wales: from the bottom up, local government, MPs, Assembly Members and universities have worked together to produce a growth bid for north Wales to remedy the failings that we believe exist within our local economy. We put forward that growth bid on behalf of the community that we represent; it is very much devised and put together by the local players.

I still get frustrated at having to go with a begging bowl either to the Treasury across the road or to Cardiff Bay to beg for investment. I want those decisions about investment and the power to raise money to be devolved to places such as north Wales, because I have lot of confidence in the north-east Wales economy. Despite the fact that we have not benefited from a lot of the funding that other parts of Wales have had, the economy in north-east Wales has developed during the period that I have been privileged to represent Wrexham. We need to address the defects in our local economy in transport and digital infrastructure. In the future, we will have an insight into our local economy to see where the defects are and to begin to address them.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Do he and the Minister agree that we need to guard against reverse devolution? If we do leave the EU, we need to be guaranteed of those funds in Wales and across the UK. They must also be distributed by the Welsh Government, because they understand how our local communities work, and they can then further devolve such decisions to places such as Wrexham and local authorities across Wales.

Ian C. Lucas: Absolutely. I have already asked for an assurance that Wales should receive no less money. As I have just said, I do not want this decision made in Cardiff Bay or in the Treasury; I would like to see it made on a devolved basis. There needs to be more devolution. When I speak to my constituents in north Wales—my hon Friend knows the area well—I find that their perception is that we need to have more local decision making. The end of the restrictive and fixed rules that have previously existed could be an opportunity, as the Federation of Small Businesses in Wales has highlighted. It said:

“The removal of European boundaries also opens up geographical possibilities...Post-2020 there will be opportunities to refit the business support environment to modern economic boundaries, including...the emerging economic regions.”

I agree entirely with that. We need a structure that accords with the economic action plan of the Welsh Government, which is a very far-sighted document by the excellent Economy Minister, Ken Skates, who is...
contributing massively to creating a growth-driven, inclusive economy in north Wales. We need to develop that and work within the confines of that economic action plan, working with the Welsh Government rather than sticking to the outmoded geographical model that we had previously, which was restricted by inappropriate local government boundaries. Certain local government areas attracted funding, while others did not. For example, the journey to north-west Wales from north-west England requires going through north-east Wales, which could not attract funding for projects in that area, so the transport system in north-east Wales has not really developed in the way needed to develop the local economy.

I certainly want an assurance from the Government that under any new system they will commit to no less investment for Wales. I also want the new First Minister, when we know who that will be, to commit to a new funding formula that means fairer funding right across Wales. I have spoken many times before about devolution in Wales, the fact that north Wales sometimes feels left behind, and the need to create new structures by working with local government, local businesses and institutions such as universities across Wales to develop an inclusive economy. We must carry forward that devolved system with local government, local businesses and institutions in Wales. I have spoken many times before about devolution funding formula that means fairer funding right across Wales, the fact that north-east Wales sometimes feels left behind, and the need to create new structures by working with local government, local businesses and institutions such as universities across Wales to develop an inclusive economy. We must carry forward that devolved system of addressing economic failings in particular areas of Wales.

This is an important debate. We need to grasp and grapple with it in the weeks, months and years ahead. I will be listening intently to the Minister’s response, to try and get some flesh on the bones of what the prosperity fund will look like, and I will also be listening carefully to my Opposition colleagues to hear what they say on the matter. This is an overdue debate, but it is of enormous importance to our constituents.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate may last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call Her Majesty’s Opposition spokesman at no later than 5.12 pm, which gives us about 20 minutes of Back-Bench time. Five members are standing, so that means you each have four minutes. I first call David T.C. Davies.

4.48 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me to speak, Mr Hollobone.

I thank the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) for introducing the debate and add to his call for the Government to ensure that Wales continues to receive the same amount of money. We will certainly have that when we leave the European Union—we will have a lot more money to spend. I differ from him on one important point, though, because I think he was arguing for a system where we simply hand over money to the Welsh Government and allow them to get on with it. We know that at the moment the European Union has some control over how that money is spent in two ways: first, it sets the rules of the game on state aid or anything else and, secondly, it has the powers to investigate when money has been misspent. It is vital that we maintain some form of central control, and here I must be a little critical.

The Welsh Assembly Government have failed on numerous occasions properly to monitor how money that has been spent in grant funding has been used. We have seen some quite scandalous decisions taking place. Some might be down to monumental incompetence; others, I fear, are due to out-and-out corruption. I will run through a couple of them and I challenge anyone to suggest that this sort of thing is right.

There is the Lisvane land deal. The Welsh Government had £20 million-worth of land—if it were good just for agriculture—that was sold at agricultural value to an organisation based in the Channel Islands. Within a matter of months, it received planning permission for housing, meaning that the Welsh taxpayer lost out on tens of millions of pounds.

There is the decision by Welsh Assembly Ministers to go into the film business, which began, as the auditor’s report shows, with the decision to buy a premises down near Newport, in Wentloog. Approximately £40 million was spent making films, and the auditor’s report says rather coyly that not much money has been recouped. About £4 million has come back. The rest of the films have either not been made or have not been seen by anyone. One of the excuses for its failure was that the Welsh Government had decided to get involved in another film studio elsewhere in south Wales. They handed over a couple of million pounds in the form of a grant, much of which appears to have been paid to the directors. There is a string of these decisions going on.

Wayne David: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T. C. Davies: I will, but I am going to have my four minutes. I am going to one of the more scandalous examples, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, he should feel free.

Wayne David: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman is using parliamentary privilege to the full here. Will he clarify how much of this is European money?

David T. C. Davies: I have not used parliamentary privilege to the full yet, but I might be about to. Some of the money certainly has been European money.

Wayne David: How much?

David T. C. Davies: I do not know the exact amount, because we are dealing with many millions of pounds here. What I do know is that if we are going to allow the Welsh Government to have a large amount of money to spend on giving out grants or putting it into infrastructure, we need to be absolutely certain that some central authority can monitor how that money is spent.

With all due respect, perhaps the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) would like to cast his mind back to the disgraceful situation with Circuit of Wales, where £9 million was handed over to the director of a company—a director who had been making donations to the Labour party. Some of that money was then taken and given to another company, which that same director was also the director of. There was no proper tendering procedure. If anyone has any doubts about this, the whole thing is written up in the Welsh auditor’s report. What we saw happening was that £1 million went over, in the form of an untendered amount of money, to a company that was owned by the person who had received the grant in the first place. There were no proper checks and balances. The same person was able to go and buy a motorcycle company based in Buckinghamshire.

Wayne David: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Wayne David: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. We have a whole list of incredible accusations here, which have no relevance whatever to the debate. That cannot be in order.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I would regard nothing that Mr Davies has said thus far as out of order, but I note Mr David’s objections and I am listening closely to all contributions made by all Members. I draw Mr Davies’s attention to the clock. He has just over a minute left.

David T. C. Davies: None of these is an accusation. They are all in the Auditor General’s report, which only came about as a result of the information that I gave them, because nobody in the Welsh Assembly—neither Members nor Government—was particularly interested in the fact that millions of pounds of their money was being spent. The reason I sent the information off was that the directors of that company came into my office and told me that their project was being backed by BMW and General Electric. It was not, because I checked with them afterwards. Then the directors sent their lawyer, Jonathan Coad, to try to take legal action against me, Martin Shipton and Trinity Newspapers, for falsely alleging General Electric and BMW’s involvement, but they did not realise that my tape recorder had accidentally been left on at the time and I had the whole thing on tape.

I say to hon. Members that the Welsh Assembly Government have failed over and over again. At least one civil servant’s name comes up every single time, many of the people involved in the decisions are all known to each other, and a lot of them have links back to the Labour party. I have touched on only three or four projects, but we all know that there are various others—Kukd was another one, as well as Kancop and Blurt. One after another, projects have received large amounts of funding, often running into millions, from the Welsh Government, and no proper checks and balances have been pursued.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Mr Ben Lake.

4.54 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Diolch, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) on securing this important and much-needed debate. Those of us representing constituencies in Wales will be all too aware of the importance of regional and structural funding schemes, and consequently that the design of the new shared prosperity fund will largely determine the prospects for our communities for decades to come. It is essential, therefore, that the new fund serves the people and communities that we are elected to represent.

Almost four months have passed since the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government confirmed in a written statement the UK Government’s commitment to the UK shared prosperity fund. The days are getting shorter, the autumn Budget has passed and, if nothing else, Christmas will soon be upon us, yet we are still awaiting quite basic details about the new fund. What will the total quantum be? When, and how, will the funds be allocated? What activities will be eligible for support, and which bodies will oversee the decisions?

As has already been mentioned, at present west Wales and the valleys receive a significant amount of funding, as our low GDP per head qualifies us as a less developed region. Over the current EU cycle, Wales received approximately £2.7 billion from European structural funds. A majority of the Welsh population—65%—to be precise—lives in this less developed region of west Wales and the valleys, where the funding goes a long way to sustaining the rural and underdeveloped economy.

While it is good that regional and structural funding programmes have been available to us, it is nevertheless a shame that our constituencies have continued to qualify for them. That is not surprising, of course, when we consider that, on the whole, UK economic development has typically focused attention and investment on urban centres, and priorities for rural areas have amounted to little more than improvement of existing connections between the countryside and the cities, so as to accelerate the trickle of prosperity from the economic engines and powerhouses to the rural periphery. The result is that the productivity of rural areas is consistently below the UK average, in stark and rather depressing contrast to that of larger towns and cities.

As the MP for Ceredigion, and as there are few signs of there being a change to UK economic strategy in the near future, I must stress that whatever the methodology used by the new shared prosperity fund, Wales must not be left financially worse off. If rumours are to be believed, and the shared prosperity fund is also to finance other responsibilities, such as the old pillar two programmes of the common agricultural policy, for example, its budget will need to be proportionally larger so as not to constitute a real-terms cut.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. We should put it on the record that the funds should not be put through the Barnett formula, but should be protected at the current European level.

Ben Lake: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. If the Barnett formula were applied to the shared prosperity fund, that would be nothing short of a disaster for our communities. We need to make sure that whatever the methodology, it is focused on the need of communities, rather than on simple population share.

I must labour the point: if the fund is to be used for other responsibilities, it cannot be reduced to a convenient tool for hard-pressed Departments to realise budget efficiencies via consolidation. The funding will be a lifeline for our communities, so it must provide Wales with no less, in real terms, than the total allocated by the EU and UK funding streams it replaces.

Furthermore, I believe the UK shared prosperity fund must operate on multi-annual financial allocations of at least seven years. Inconvenient though that may be for the Treasury’s spending review cycles, it would allow recipient organisations and groups the time for proper planning and implementation of larger scale and transformative projects—the types of project needed seriously to ratchet up jobs, wages and living standards in constituencies such as Ceredigion. We cannot settle for mere tinkering around the edges. What is required is a programme that allows for substantial and prolonged investment, so that our areas are no longer less developed and eligible for such assistance.
As the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) mentioned, in terms of the shared prosperity fund’s administration, important aspects of economic development are devolved, so the Welsh portion of the new fund should be devolved to the Welsh Government, potentially, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) just mentioned, as an additional, separate block grant from the Treasury, so that we may bypass the Barnett formula.

Time is against me, so I will conclude with a question to the Minister, who I welcome to his place in the Welsh Office. Will he guarantee that the UK shared prosperity fund will be, in real terms, at least equivalent to the funds that it is replacing, and that its budget will be proportionally increased if other EU—or, for that matter, UK—competencies are to be blended into the fund?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Jo Stevens.

5 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) on securing the debate. He has had far more luck in securing the debate than I have had in getting answers from the Secretary of State and his conveyor belt of Welsh Office Ministers to my 18 questions on the shared prosperity fund over the past 13 months.

Two years and five months on from the referendum, we know precisely three things about the fund. We know what it will be called; we know it will be run by the England-focused Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; and we know that there will be a consultation at some point. That is it. I appreciate that the Minister is new to his position—I welcome him to the Welsh administration, important aspects of economic development for areas that need it most and to claw back powers that are to be devolved to the Welsh Government, potentially, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) just mentioned, as an additional, separate block grant from the Treasury, so that we may bypass the Barnett formula.

The European regional development fund and the European social fund have alone provided £2.1 billion to Wales between 2014 and 2016, and inspired a further £1.1 billion in match funding. In 2016, when I spoke in the House about the importance of Cardiff University’s Brain Research Imaging Centre in my constituency, I made the point that the shared prosperity fund will not be properly shared, will not deliver prosperity and will probably contain less funding for Wales than we receive as members of the European Union. That is why I hope we stay in the European Union.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) on securing the debate.

The 2017 Conservative manifesto promised to set up a new UK shared prosperity fund to replace EU funds, with the intention that the new fund will “reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations” and will be “cheap to administer, low in bureaucracy and targeted where it is needed most”, so we know how to measure the promises that the Conservative Government are now making. Two and a half years later—not from the manifesto but from the referendum—we still do not know how much funding will be available, how it will be divided across the country, what activities will be eligible for support or who will take the decisions on how the money is spent. There is a huge fear that that will be not just a financial grab, but also a power grab, and that the Conservative Government will use this opportunity to reduce funding for areas that need it most and to claw back powers that sit naturally with the devolved Administrations.

That concern drove us to create the all-party parliamentary group on post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. In that spirit, we worked with the Industrial Communities Alliance and launched a national inquiry to help us understand the wide-ranging views on the key questions that I have highlighted. That involved inviting a large number of organisations to submit evidence to the inquiry about what they wanted from the shared prosperity fund. Respondents included local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, the TUC—including the Welsh TUC—mayoral combined authorities and devolved Administrations. Such was the huge interest and concern that we received submissions from over 80 different bodies across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Many hon. Members present here and education opportunities. Those university-led ESF projects have promoted routes into higher education and supported graduate retention rates in economic growth areas that are so important to my city’s economy, such as professional services, creative and digital industries, and life sciences. That funding does not fund only big infrastructure projects. Last week, I went to four primary schools in my constituency—Adamsdown, Albany, Marlborough and Springwood—and I noticed in every school a sign that said that the children had a carton of milk every day through the European Union school milk scheme. We know that the Conservative Government have never been fans of children’s school milk, but can the Minister guarantee that those children will continue to receive their milk every day after 29 March 2019?

We know that we cannot rely on this Government for the green light to vital projects in Wales. The Swansea Bay tidal lagoon is one example, and electrification between Cardiff and Swansea is another. From a Welsh perspective, the shared prosperity fund will not be properly shared, will not deliver prosperity and will probably contain less funding for Wales than we receive as members of the European Union. That is why I hope we stay in the European Union.
are members of the APPG. The report will be published on Friday, but I will give a brief summary of the key recommendations.

There is an overwhelming consensus that the shared prosperity fund must not comprise a penny less than what the EU would have invested in Britain from 2020 to 2024. The Government must, above all, prioritise narrowing the differences in prosperity across the UK. In England, the funding should be allocated to local areas on the basis of a robust formula and up-to-date statistics. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the UK Government should respect the devolution settlement and any guidelines should therefore be kept at a strategic and broad level, and agreed with the devolved Administrations, who should keep responsibility for detailed design and delivery. Those findings all reflect my own concerns. The report has been signed off by all vice-chairs of the APPG, so it is a cross-party report; we shall send it to the relevant Secretaries of State and seek follow-up meetings.

Westminster must not use Brexit and the end of the EU’s regional funding as an opportunity to short-change the poorest parts of the UK. The UK Government must not preside over a Westminster power grab, whereby devolved Administrations are denied the appropriate control over funds. The Government have promised their own consultation—I am sure the Minister will tell us more about that—which I understand will be launched before Christmas. It is very important that they take the recommendations in our report into account, particularly as they reflect the views of more than 80 organisations at the coalface of those issues. The design must not be dreamed up in Westminster or Whitehall bubbles, but driven by the practitioners—the people who really know what works, and what does not, in their communities.

5.7 pm

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) on securing the debate. I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies)—the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee—chose to talk about other things when the topic of the debate is so important for the future of Wales.

My constituency has been a major beneficiary of both European structural funds and the European regional development fund. In the 1980s, my constituency had the national average of unemployment—mass unemployment and mass depopulation, which is why it qualified with low GDP for European structural funds. Objective 1 has been a success in my area and it has helped repair communities through its social cohesion funds. It has also helped port communities with infrastructure—the main gateway between Wales and the rest of Europe—and helped the agricultural, food and farming sector.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) said, the further education and higher education sectors have also been major beneficiaries. There have been real, tangible outcomes in my constituency, such as energy centres, food technology centres and job creation, and Wales and the valleys are benefiting from this.

However, we still need to reflect on how we are going forward, because my area is still a low area of gross value added—GVA—and that needs to change. That is why we need a further commitment from the Government for post-2020: that the circumstances will not change and that there will be real growth. Unemployment in my area is now below the national average, when in the 1980s it was double the national average. That is job creation helped by European structural funds—real people benefiting from real jobs in my area. That is why I am a big supporter.

Even today, we have great investment coming in. In 2015, we had a brand-new, state-of-the-art, innovative science park, which was part funded by the Welsh Government and attracted private investment, but it would not have been possible without the grant from the ERDF. In 2017, we got a business park at Llangefi, which now works closely with colleges and universities to ensure that we get top-quality jobs coming to my area. Again, that did not happen in the ‘80s, before the structural funds were put in place in the ‘90s. A tourist package worth £1.7 million will help the port of Holyhead, which was damaged by storm—again, some of that money comes from the European social fund. It is a good thing. Energy companies are investing in my area, such as Minesto from Sweden, and a not-for-profit organisation has been set up—an indigenous company in Wales—because of ERDF funding.

Ian C. Lucas: Does my hon. Friend agree that the determination of companies and institutions throughout north Wales to work together is a massive attraction to outside businesses to come to our area? We have shown that we work very effectively together and can plan the north Wales growth bid.

Albert Owen: Absolutely. That is the next point that I want to move on to. I am a strong supporter of devolution—I have fought for it in referendums, and I have seen its enhancement—but devolution is no good just going from Whitehall down the M4 to Cardiff Bay. It needs to go throughout the areas of Wales, including to north-west Wales and north Wales generally. Real devolution is about empowering people in their local communities. My hon. Friend is right: we have a structure in the north Wales growth bid. We have a board set up, with business and local authority representatives, and they have the ability to be a mechanism for distribution of the new growth fund in the future. I hope that the Minister will take that on board. I know that he is visiting my constituency in north Wales shortly, and he will hear about that.

I want to quote the remarks referred to by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), in which the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government stated:

“The UK Shared Prosperity Fund will tackle inequalities within communities by raising productivity, especially in parts of the UK whose economies are furthest behind...It will have simplified administrative arrangements aimed at targeting funding effectively; and...It will operate across the UK. The UK Government says it will respect the devolution settlements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and will engage the devolved administrations”.

I want those words to be put into action. I want the new Minister to take that on board and to work with us, as Welsh Members, to ensure that areas such as mine continue to grow and will benefit from the shared
prosperity fund. I do not want to see this Government pull the rug from under the feet of the poor communities, education communities and farming communities that have benefited since 2000. Europe based its European structural funds on need, and that is what we need: to establish the needs of areas throughout the UK, including periphery areas such as the one that I represent, to show that we will go forward, that we do share prosperity and that we share it at a pace equal to that in the south-east of England. At the end of the day, we want a more equal society, economically and socially.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, and the guidelines are five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister and the remaining time Mr Lucas may use to sum up the debate.

5.13 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your esteemed chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I welcome the Minister to his place, for the second time this afternoon. He is the fourth Minister in one year; let us hope he stays around during this crucial period in our political history. I give a big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) for securing the debate and for speaking so lucidly. A reflection of the importance of this debate can be seen in the number of Labour Members who attended it—nine MPs, I believe, which is almost a third of the Welsh parliamentary party.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham made an excellent speech in which he drew out some important issues, such as the lack of clarity in the whole Brexit process—I share that concern—and ensuring that Wales stays a net beneficiary of the funding. He also, rightly, talked about the disparity within Wales, between east Wales, and west Wales and the valleys.

The hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) went off on one, I think. He had an opportunity to highlight some important issues, but he made some unsubstantiated claims and did not even mention the issue of EU funding. He was one of two Conservatives who argued for extra centralisation of powers with the shared prosperity fund. That worries me.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) mentioned the importance of rurality—I share those concerns too, as I have a rural constituency myself—and the fact that he does not want the shared prosperity fund to be Barnettised. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) mentioned the importance of funding for universities and schools. That is key, because our universities should be driving our 21st-century economy.

I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on his all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding, which is taking a cross-party approach, which is the way it should be. He drew out several points: that the devolution settlement should be respected, that there should be no power grab or financial grab, that we have had a lack of detail so far and that we do not want Wales to suffer financially as a result of voting for Brexit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) listed the many benefits of being a member of the European Union and a recipient of the highest levels of European grant in the whole of Europe. He is a great campaigner on energy, which is his specific focus, and he dreamt up the name “Energy Island” for Ynys Môn—he is Mr Energy Island himself. He said that there should be more devolution to the areas of Wales. All around, we had some excellent contributions.

From my own perspective, I am very worried about the slipping timescale for the consultation on the shared prosperity fund. There have been 113 written parliamentary questions about the shared prosperity fund, two of them from me about the timing. We were promised that the consultation would take place in 2018, but on the last day in Parliament before the summer recess, it was slipped out that the consultation would be by the end of 2018. We are now almost at the end of 2018 and there has been no mention yet. Please, may we have some detail on the timing?

I share concerns expressed around the Chamber about how much funding we will receive. Before the Brexit referendum, the Brexiteers came into Wales to say, “Wales will not suffer. It will have exactly the same funding after Brexit as it did before.” We want to ensure that that will be the case. Another of my concerns about the European funding is that we had both capital funding under the ERDF and revenue funding under ESF. We want to ensure that that continues. In Wales, we benefited tremendously from it.

This is not all just from a party political perspective, so I will finish with the words of the Federation of Small Businesses:

“The FSB calls for the devolved nations to retain the powers to set their own allocations and frameworks for how funding should be prioritised, which takes account of local economic needs.

Regional policy is fundamentally about balancing economic outcomes. As economic development is a devolved function, we believe Welsh Government are best placed to deliver any replacement funding through the Shared Prosperity Fund”.

So please, no power grab by the centre. Leave those powers and that finance in Wales.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Nigel Adams): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) on securing this debate. I know him from my time on the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but he probably does not realise that I visited Wrexham for the first time when I was eight, to watch my local non-league team, Goole Town, play Wrexham at the Racecourse Ground in the 1974 FA cup. We managed to get a one-all draw—sadly, we got stuffed in the replay.

Jo Stevens: With that remark, the Minister made himself what we call in Wales Western Mail Welsh.

Nigel Adams: It was my first visit to Wales, so I thought it was worth bringing up.

Chris Ruane: Has the Minister ever been to the Vale of Clwyd?

Nigel Adams: I do not think I have, but I am sure it will be on my agenda shortly. I am looking forward to going to north Wales, and I was in Cardiff on the second day of my appointment.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and for their kind wishes on my appointment as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales. It is a great honour
to be asked to join the Department and to carry on the work of my predecessors. Although I have not yet been in the job a week, I understand and recognise many of the issues that have been raised. Someone said that they are a passionate lot in Wales; that has been exemplified this afternoon, and it is an incredibly important debate to have.

As the hon. Member for Wrexham pointed out, Wales has been a net beneficiary of funding from the EU. By the time the current cycle finishes in 2020, Wales will have received more than £5 billion. The hon. Gentleman’s constituency has benefited from that funding to the tune of more than £14 million between 2005 and 2016. Projects such as the community resource centre in his constituency, Coedpoeth Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Centre, and the west Wrexham learning project have received funding from Europe. It is understandable that they, like other organisations in Wales, both large and small, will want to know what comes next.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) mentioned that as part of our 2017 manifesto, we set out proposals for a UK shared prosperity fund, which would “reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations”. As part of that commitment, we recognise the role that the Welsh Government and other devolved Administrations have played in delivering structural funds over the last 20 or so years. We are absolutely committed to engaging with them as we develop the proposals. The Government have already begun discussions, which will continue, at official and ministerial levels.

Since 2016, we have worked together to agree deals; the Cardiff and Swansea deals are together worth £2.5 billion. We are working on a £120 million deal for north Wales, which I have already had a briefing on and am very keen to get involved in, to see what I can do to help deliver those projects. That was announced in the Budget, as Members will be aware, along with a commitment to start work on a deal for mid-Wales. Those are examples of our Governments working together across administrative boundaries to strike deals that will power economic growth throughout Wales.

The shared prosperity fund provides the UK with an enormous opportunity to redefine the way we invest our money in line with priorities unique to the people, communities and businesses across all nations of our Union, not least Wales. It is right that these groups be afforded the chance to express their views directly to all Governments on the priorities and most effective structures for future funding. Our forthcoming public consultation is an important first step in shaping those discussions, and will ensure that interested parties from across the UK are given the opportunity to inform the debate.

Chris Ruane: The Minister says that the consultation is upcoming; can he give us the exact date?

Nigel Adams: This debate is a starting point, but the consultation will begin before the end of the year. It will be for others in Government to announce the date, but given that we are halfway through November, it is probably easy to work out that the hon. Gentleman will not have long to wait for the consultation to begin.

Albert Owen: I am not criticising the Minister, because he has only been in the job a short time, but it is the duty of Wales Office Ministers to stand up for Wales. We are having this debate to put pressure on him, so that the Welsh voice is heard loud and clear in this debate. It is not for others to decide; it is for Government to decide, and he is our voice in that Government.

Nigel Adams: I completely agree. I see myself as a champion for Wales in Westminster. That is incredibly important and must be my priority. I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman the exact date, but I can say that it will be this year, which indicates that it will be incredibly soon. I hope he takes me at my word when I say that the consultation is about to start.

Given the significance of the shared prosperity fund, it is right that questions about the size, structure and priorities for investment develop as we approach next year’s spending review, which will determine the amount of money that will be discussed.

Ben Lake: On the spending review, should we be concerned that it seems that responsibility for this fund has been given to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, rather than the Treasury? Might that suggest that it is not as big a pot of money as we would hope?

Nigel Adams: I certainly do not write the comprehensive spending review—well, not yet. I ask the hon. Gentleman to bear with, to coin a phrase. I do not think he has anything to be concerned about in terms of MHCLG being involved in this process—it is only right that it be involved.

In the time I have left, let me turn to specific points raised by hon. Members. In his eloquent speech, the hon. Member for Wrexham spoke passionately about his constituency and his area of north Wales. He asked whether the same rules would apply across the UK. We will absolutely respect the devolution settlement and work with the devolved Administrations. As I said, we are committed to consulting before the end of the year—in the next few weeks—and people will have that opportunity to set out their views on the fund.

The hon. Gentleman rightly commented that the system has not always worked as well as he had hoped. He said that investments had not always delivered the expected return in gross value added terms, that some EU funding had not worked particularly well for Wrexham, and that there had been a bit of a missed opportunity. That is absolutely right. That is why we should have this debate, and why we should all contribute to the consultation.

The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Aberavon, whom I thank for his work on the all-party parliamentary group on post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas, said decisions should be made locally. They both made valid points in that respect. In my view and that of the Government, EU exit provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider how funding for growth is delivered across the UK. The consultation will be a great opportunity to start that conversation.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) and others asked when we would publish the details of the fund. As I said, we will do that in the next few weeks, before the end of the year. We are absolutely committed to that. That will give everyone across the UK the
opportunity to contribute their views, and to help those views to form Government policy on this issue. Decisions on the actual spending will be made in the spending review next year.

I would have liked to respond to one or two other hon. Members, but I want to give the hon. Member for Wrexham the opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank everyone for contributing. We want an economically strong Wales in a prosperous United Kingdom. Working alongside the Welsh Government through the shared prosperity fund, we can ensure that becomes a reality.

5.28 pm

Ian C. Lucas: A number of Members asked for a commitment that Wales would not receive less under the UK shared prosperity fund than it currently receives. I note that this commitment, which has been asked for ever since the general election, still has not been given. There is great concern about that.

Nigel Adams rose—

Ian C. Lucas: I will give way to the Minister if he wants to give me that commitment.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the exact amount must be considered as part of the comprehensive spending review in due course.

Ian C. Lucas: It is pretty fundamental that we do not want Wales to lose out. I think I speak for everyone who participated in the debate when I ask the Minister to convey to the Government, on behalf of Wales, that the sum must not be less than it is currently. As we heard, there are different views about how the fund—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Norman Lamb will speak on the publication of the Eleventh Report of the Science and Technology Committee, “Evidence-based early years intervention”, for up to 10 minutes, during which 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 Norman Lamb to respond to each in turn. Normally, I would say that statement I will call Members to put questions on interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his intervention”, for up to 10 minutes, during which no and Technology Committee, “Evidence-based early years in volvement with the criminal justice system. Risk increases such as mental or physical ill health, worklessness or to encounter further problems in later life—problems such experiences as a child are significantly more likely strong evidence to demonstrate that those who suffer cause the child is tragedy enough. However, there is now domestic violence. The trauma that such experiences other difficult situation, such as in a household where could have been abuse, neglect or growing up in some other scenario, without central support or scrutiny. We know that pockets of good practice exist, but the Early Intervention Foundation told us that it experiences “lots of examples where we see a gap between what we know from robust, peer-reviewed literature and what happens in local services and systems”.

With fragmented and variable delivery of early intervention across England, vulnerable children are being horribly failed around the country. That is why my Committee is urging the Government to draw up a national strategy on early intervention, to empower and encourage local authorities to deliver effective, sustainable and evidence-based early intervention.

In addition to providing the impetus to seize the opportunity of early intervention, the national strategy should address several major challenges that we heard that local authorities face in delivering evidence-based early intervention. Among those challenges are, first, that awareness of the impact of childhood adversity and how it can be addressed could be greater among those who work with children. So the early years workforce should be, first, defined, and then training should be reviewed to ensure that this workforce has the knowledge that they need to be effective in their work.

Secondly, the collection and analysis of appropriate data can help to identify those families who would benefit from early intervention, as well as providing insight on how well different early intervention approaches are working. The national strategy should identify what data ought to be collected and support local authorities in delivering data-driven services. At the moment, the early years are almost like a data-free zone. It is an extraordinary situation that, as children and adults grow, we collect an enormous amount of data about them nationally, including in the school system. We have an understanding of what is going on later, but in the early years there is no national data—it is fascinating. Therefore, the problem is that we are spending a lot of public money without knowing whether it is being spent effectively.

Thirdly, the strategy should make use of the growing field of implementation science to maximise the chances of success for efforts to deliver effective and sustainable early intervention. We want a central specialist team to be set up in the Early Intervention Foundation to help that it works. The Early Intervention Foundation has reviewed studies of over 118 early intervention programmes and found that 45 of them demonstrated robust evidence of positive impact. Similarly, the Children and Parents Service in Manchester has real-world evidence showing that early intervention can significantly reduce a child’s risk of neglect or abuse—in other words, it can stop the trauma from happening in the first place.

As well as transforming lives, early intervention can save taxpayers’ money. The Early Intervention Foundation has estimated that the cost of “late” intervention—in other words, not intervening early—is at least £16.6 billion every year, and that is without taking into account the positive economic impact of people living more fulfilled lives.

The Scottish and Welsh Governments and some local authorities in England have made early intervention to address childhood adversity and trauma a priority. However, the Government in Westminster have not yet seized the opportunity. Instead, local authorities in England are essentially left to their own devices, without central support and scrutiny. We know that pockets of good practice exist, but the Early Intervention Foundation told us that it experiences “lots of examples where we see a gap between what we know from robust, peer-reviewed literature and what happens in local services and systems”.

With fragmented and variable delivery of early intervention across England, vulnerable children are being horribly failed around the country. That is why my Committee is urging the Government to draw up a national strategy on early intervention, to empower and encourage local authorities to deliver effective, sustainable and evidence-based early intervention.

In addition to providing the impetus to seize the opportunity of early intervention, the national strategy should address several major challenges that we heard that local authorities face in delivering evidence-based early intervention. Among those challenges are, first, that awareness of the impact of childhood adversity and how it can be addressed could be greater among those who work with children. So the early years workforce should be, first, defined, and then training should be reviewed to ensure that this workforce has the knowledge that they need to be effective in their work.

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local authorities to deliver the national strategy and apply the evidence of what we know works around the country.

Some improvements to the delivery of early intervention in England can be made without requiring substantial new funding; no doubt that is music to the ears of the Minister for School Standards, who is present. Nevertheless, the Government should recognise the long-term cost savings available through effective early intervention and be willing to make the upfront investments now, so that we can save money in the long run. The new strategy should seek to drive a general shift in the focus of current expenditure on late interventions, which are inevitably less effective, so that we focus more on earlier intervention.

Some programmes are already in place that aim to identify families that are in need of support and that help to provide that support. Foremost among them is the Healthy Child programme, under which every child should receive five mandatory health visits before the age of three. However, Public Health England statistics show that, other than the newborn visit, only around 80% of children receive such visits. Without this interaction with health visitors, opportunities to identify families who would benefit from support are missed. The Government must set out a clear strategy to show how they intend to increase coverage of the five mandated visits to 100%. They must also make sure that such a strategy does not simply increase the strain on the health-visiting workforce, thereby diluting the impact that they can have on each family.

We also call upon the Government to state clearly their position on the future of the Sure Start programme and children’s centres. A consultation on these centres was announced in 2015, but it has still not been launched. In the meantime, Ofsted’s regular inspections of these centres have been suspended, pending the outcome of the consultation, which has not happened yet. Local authorities need clarity about the future of these centres. If the Government intend to hold a consultation, they should launch it within the next three months.

To conclude, early intervention that is used to tackle childhood adversity can transform lives and save costs to the Government—a win-win. There is now a pressing need for a fundamental shift in the Government’s approach to early intervention, targeting childhood adversity and trauma, and applying the evidence of what we know works. The Government should match the ambition of the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and build on the example set by a number of English local authorities, to make early intervention and childhood adversity a priority, and to set out a clear national strategy by the end of this parliamentary Session to empower and encourage local authorities to deliver effective, sustainable and evidence-based early intervention.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I now invite questions. I stress that they should be questions, not speeches.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). He rightly said that the Scottish Government already have a strategic plan in place. In fact, they held a conference recently on adverse childhood experiences, and that issue is at the core of what they are trying to do. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech that he did not think additional funding, or much additional funding, would be required to carry out this plan. However, at a time when so many local authorities in England are failing and overspending their children’s budget, does he think that this is actually going to happen?

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I applaud the Scottish Government, the NHS in Scotland, and the Scottish schools system for grasping this nettle, understanding what the evidence shows, and acting upon it. We say in the report that there are things local authorities can do now without any additional funding, and in a way, that is demonstrated by the fact that some local authorities are doing them. Those local authorities are looking at the evidence and applying it, and using the money that they have in the most effective way. I particularly applaud Greater Manchester for that. Dr Caroline White, who leads the Children and Parents Service in Greater Manchester, acted as expert adviser to the Committee inquiry. A lot can be learned from places such as Greater Manchester.

However, the Committee also makes the point to Government that there is a prize to be won if we invest more in effective early intervention: not only transforming lives, but saving money for the state further down the track. It is a powerful case of “invest to save”, and I want to indicate to the Minister—I do not know whether he intends to say something—that I am really keen to work with the Departments on this. It is not in any way a party political issue: there is a strong consensus on our Committee in support of the sort of action we are calling for. We could achieve a real gain by applying the evidence that we demonstrate in the report to make a difference to children’s lives, and I am keen to work collaboratively to make that happen.
Anti-bullying Week

1.43 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move, that this House has considered anti-bullying week 2018.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting today’s debate. I am also grateful that we are able to have this debate during Anti-bullying Week, as was made possible last year when a similar debate was secured by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). Obviously, today is quite a busy day for many parliamentary colleagues, so I fear that some of the Members who I had expected to be with us will not be here, but it is important that we mark Anti-bullying Week in this way.

Like many constituency Members, many of my Fridays are spent visiting local schools—I should think all colleagues do that. I try to visit a school every Friday, and I find that they are all trying very hard to create an environment in which children feel safe, supported, and free from bullying. Just last week, I visited Shirley Community Primary School and had some wonderful conversations with the staff and the children, who were running around a field doing the daily mile. I have to say that they were rather better at it than I was, but it was still good to get some exercise. However, despite all the hard work that teachers are doing, it is important that we spend some time considering the challenges that we face in our schools, and particularly how we teach our children to treat each other. This week provides an opportunity for people to reflect on that question, and creates a space for staff and students to have those conversations about how we treat one another—conversations that are sometimes difficult.

Anti-bullying Week is organised by the Anti-Bullying Alliance, which is a fantastic coalition of anti-bullying charities. Anti-bullying Week reaches 75% of schools in England, touching over 6 million children and young people. It was excellent to see the splendid event organised at Speaker’s House yesterday, which a number of people came here to celebrate. Anti-bullying Week involves many charities, youth organisations and schools, and is used to provide the resources and tools to raise awareness. This year, there have been specific events on particular days, and today is “Stop Speak Support” — cyber-bullying day.

As we all know, sadly, with the rise of social media and technology, a whole range of new challenges has come along. The playground no longer stops when the bell goes. Whereas these issues could once have been dealt with in class, they now extend well beyond the playground, often on the way home and outside school. Sadly, one in five teenagers has experienced cyber-bullying in just the past two months, and children who have been cyber-bullied are more likely than their peers to be lonely, anxious or depressed. I think we are all aware of the rising numbers of young people who are presenting with mental health issues. It is right that the Government are tackling that problem, but of course, it is not just the Government who should respond to it. Social media companies must also take some responsibility and create the kinds of environments in which respectful conduct is required, especially for children.

Section 103 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 requires the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to publish a code of practice for providers of online social media platforms. That is good, but we also have to make sure that that code of practice is enforced, and sadly, it seems at times that it is not being enforced sufficiently well. Facebook, for example, has faced criticism in recent months for pushing back its targets for tackling cyber-bullying. I believe that those mega-corporations can be a power for good, but they also have to take responsibility for maintaining acceptable practices on their platforms.

The Diana Award, which is an anti-bullying charity, runs the Be Strong Online ambassador programme, which empowers students and staff to take a peer-led approach to digital resilience and helps teach young people to explore the digital world safely. It is good to hear that since 2016, over 1,200 young people and staff members have been trained as Be Strong Online ambassadors. That is an example of how we can help improve schools across the board and work with social media companies to improve the quality of our online interactions.

My interest in and awareness of this topic came not just from having been a school governor and chair of governors in a past life—like, I suspect, many of my colleagues—but from a strong constituency link with Red Balloon, one of the most highly respected charities working in this field. That charity runs learning centres and schools for bullied children. It was created 22 years ago by a constituent of mine, Dr Carrie Herbert, who is a real force of nature and a force for change. She started that charity—in her own kitchen— when she saw some of the problems that children were facing, and the charity’s story featured in national newspapers over the weekend.

I will say a little about the report that was in The Guardian on Saturday. One particular young person was prepared to tell her story, and in many ways it probably speaks for many others. Hannah Letters, who is 17, explained:

“...I struggled with the transition to secondary school”—we are all aware that that is a problem in many cases—“and found it hard to make friends.”

This is very sad to read, but:

“She was sent messages on social media, telling her that no one liked her. ‘One of the girls turned and said to me, ‘If you had looked after your mother better, she wouldn't have got cancer.'”

That is an awful thing to say to any child. She said:

“I had such low self-esteem by then, anything she said I believed. I started to blame myself.”

By the time she was 13, she was self-harming. The article states:

“The bullies were constantly on her mind and she would wake up screaming from nightmares.”

That is a terrible story, but sadly it is not unique.

Hannah was not particularly happy with the response she got from her school. In a familiar cycle, each time she or her mother complained, the bullying got worse.

The article continues:

“When the bullies physically attacked her, it was the last straw for Letters’ mother. She took her off the school roll. That meant her school was absolved of its legal responsibility to provide her with an education. She became yet another statistic: one of the 16,000 children aged 11 to 15 who...’self-exclude’ from school due to bullying.”

That is where Red Balloon came in.

Hannah joined Red Balloon three years ago, and enrolled in its education programmes and received help with wellbeing support. She is planning on studying...
medicine at university. That is a huge turnaround from the situation she found herself in a few years ago, and it is not a unique story: Red Balloon turns around the lives of students every year, but it is almost a unique service, and here is the rub. The evidence from such institutions as Red Balloon shows that intervention works—it really does—but the truth is that it is also very expensive.

Although intervention looks expensive up front, in the long term it is almost certainly cheaper to intervene and make the difference that Red Balloon can make. For most local authorities, the amounts of money required to put in that intervention would be unthinkable in the current context. In fact, they do not release the money they would have been spending on that education. That is perhaps understandable, given that many find themselves in dire straits. While I suspect we will hear some warm words this afternoon, the real truth is that, although we can see what works, our choice as a society is not to do it, and that should weigh heavily on us. In the meantime, until we can do better, we must support schools to tackle bullying on a daily basis.

Mainstream education must be able to teach children how to treat each other with respect, not just how to pass exams. I suspect there might not be complete agreement with what I am about to say, but my sense is that many schools are increasingly pressured to focus on exams. Many are forced to limit the subjects they offer due to funding pressures. It has been controversial over recent years, but schools have been able to give less attention to some subjects because of the English baccalaureate. In some cases, the decline of the opportunity to take part in arts education can have possibly unintended consequences.

In recent weeks, teachers and academics have written to me with their concerns about their students’ opportunities to develop creative skills and self-expression, which are vital for getting them into work and university, for being part of the community and for expressing themselves. I suspect that taking arts education out of school education can reduce the opportunity for the discussions that arise around the arts, such as how we relate to each other and the kind of society we want to live in.

Returning to the positive, Anti-bullying Week offers schools the opportunity to engage in those discussions and provides the kind of platform on which children can think further about those very important questions, which do not always appear on exam papers.

This year, Anti-bullying Week has the theme “Choose Respect”. It encourages us to own our behaviour and to remember that we all have a choice in how we behave and that respecting each other is an active choice. In school, we should learn how to relate to those who agree with us and those who do not, and to those from different backgrounds and those with different interests. We take those skills with us into our futures and use them for the rest of our lives.

Elizabeth Nassem, a researcher at Birmingham City University, wrote in The Guardian a few months ago:

“Any school trying to tackle bullying needs to look beyond the ‘bully’ and ‘victim’ labels. Instead, it’s helpful to consider bullying as a spectrum of negative interactions that range from mild to severe, such as name-calling and hitting. Ask the children in your school about their experiences of bullying, why children might bully others, and how they think bullying should be addressed...Teachers should consistently speak to children respectfully, listen to children, respond to their views and take time to understand their perspectives. Pupils are then more likely to then do the same with their peers.”

That fits in very well with this year’s Anti-bullying Week theme of “Choose Respect”.

There is also a need to look at the disproportionate amount of bullying that some particular groups experience, including disabled children and those with special educational needs, as well as those who experience bullying based on race and faith. Looked-after children and young carers also suffer disproportionately. By having discussions at school about bullying, and how children can work to choose respect, I hope that can be addressed.

One section of society that is sadly all too often the victim of bullying is people with disabilities. According to the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability, 30% of disabled adults in the UK say they have experienced hostile behaviour motivated by their disability. That is three in 10. That is a distressing statistic and the impact can be chilling, with concern about hostile behaviour reportedly preventing one disabled adult in three from going out in their local area. That makes loneliness and isolation even worse.

There are things that can be done. Since 2014, Leonard Cheshire has run a successful scheme in Northern Ireland with the police to support disability hate crime survivors. It is called, “Be Safe Stay Safe”, and it provides independent advocacy support from qualified, experienced advocates to victims and witnesses of disability hate crime to ensure accessibility to the police and the wider criminal justice system. Will the Minister look at how that experience could be transferred to the rest of the United Kingdom?

Others who also suffer include those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender; ethnic or faith minorities; young carers; and looked-after children. The Anti-Bullying Alliance found that one child in four aged from seven to 15 reports being frequently bullied, while more than a third of disabled children and those with special educational needs are victims of regular bullying. Nearly half of school pupils say that their friends use discriminatory language towards LGBT people. Last year, a poll by the Diana Award found that 61% of school staff had witnessed racism-driven bullying. That is totally unacceptable, and it shows that even in 2018 we have a long way to go to stamp out racism entirely in our schools.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance is calling for urgent action to protect children at higher risk of bullying, and for mental health and wellbeing leads in each school, as proposed in the Green Paper on mental health, so as to have a responsibility to prevent bullying. The alliance thinks, and I agree, that that should be part of a co-ordinated, whole-school approach. While today’s debate is not party political, I gently make the point that these things all require resourcing. The relatively paltry amounts made available in the Budget are unlikely to stretch across all the existing pressures that schools face alongside such new initiatives. If we are going to do it, it has to be funded properly; otherwise, it will fall on already very stretched teachers.

The issue has been addressed by Government and Opposition MPs. By law, all state schools must have a behaviour policy in place that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. That policy is, of course, decided by the school, and all teachers, pupils and parents should be told about it. The Government have said that the Department for Education is working
with schools to help them to create an atmosphere of respect that will reduce bullying behaviour both offline and online. I understand that the Minister has written in the Telegraph on the need for effective anti-bullying policies both online and offline. There is clearly widespread understanding of the issues.

I hope that we hear from the Minister that he will seek extra funding from his colleagues to support schools in their attempts to tackle these deep-seated and important issues. We will have a spending review next year, and it is hard to imagine a more important issue that could be addressed to tackle long-term societal problems. I welcome the opportunity to hear from the Minister so that, on what has been a complicated day in this place, he can give some good news to bring us to the end of Anti-bullying Week.

2 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate, raising awareness and championing the cause of eradicating bullying. It is Anti-bullying Week, and the theme is to choose respect. As the hon. Gentleman rightly outlined, the prevalence of bullying is increasing, including online and cyber-bullying where the bullying never ends. It does not end when children leave the playground or leave school; it continues. The devastating impact that that has on the mental health of young people should not be forgotten. He also rightly spoke of the tragic experience of one of his young constituents, and I am sure that many more people could speak to that experience.

Although today much of the debate and news coverage will be about Brexit and the next Cabinet Minister to resign, someone, somewhere, is experiencing bullying right now. Whether in the playground or the workplace, bullying affects people from all different backgrounds, and those at different stages and ages in life. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I fully support today’s debate. Brexit reigns strong, but we must continue to use this House to discuss important issues that affect people every day.

The SNP takes bullying very seriously, and believes that there is no place in Scotland for prejudice or discrimination. Core to that is the belief that everyone deserves to be treated fairly and that bullying of any kind is therefore unacceptable. Where it occurs it must be addressed quickly and effectively. In schools, it often falls on headteachers, teachers and local authorities to decide how bullying is tackled.

The Scottish Government expect all schools to develop and implement an anti-bullying policy, which should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. The hon. Member for Cambridge spoke about the experience in England. I can speak only of the Scottish Government’s experience and responsibilities. They have ensured that schools have an anti-bullying policy, which should be at the heart of every whole-school approach to create a positive and welcoming ethos. We want all young people to learn tolerance, respect, equality and good citizenship to address and prevent prejudice, as well as to build healthy relationships.

Bullying can take many forms, and can be based on prejudices. That is why the Scottish Government have been working with the campaign Time for Inclusive Education. I give credit to Jordan and Liam, who have worked tirelessly with the Scottish Government to push forward on the campaign to ensure that schools deal with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender identity bullying, discrimination and prejudice. That is why the SNP Scottish Government will now include LGBT rights in the Scottish curriculum, which will send a strong message throughout the world that Scotland is a progressive country and that bullying will not be tolerated.

In November 2017, the Scottish Government published their anti-bullying guidance: “Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland’s Children and Young People”. The guidance provides a holistic approach to anti-bullying that makes it clear that all types of bullying are unacceptable, and that adults involved in young people’s lives have a role to play in preventing and responding to bullying. It includes guidance on prejudice-based bullying, recording and monitoring of online and offline bullying, labelling, and the impact and outcomes of bullying.

We believe that the focus must be on prevention and early intervention, and I echo the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Cambridge; that requires resources and funding, and cannot be achieved otherwise. It must also be reflected in anti-bullying policies. However, it is one thing to have a policy; ensuring that it is implemented in practice is very different.

The most successful interventions are embedded within a positive ethos and inclusive culture. Such interventions are more likely to achieve positive outcomes and destinations for young people. I am hopeful that with anti-bullying guidance and LGBT-inclusive education in Scotland we will begin to shape the attitudes of young people in Scotland, encouraging them to celebrate their differences. Inclusive education is essential to all young people, and it is high time that we created the conditions for a culture of inclusion and understanding of the impact of prejudice and discrimination. Implementing such policies will go some way to securing that.

We also see bullying in workplaces, including this one. It would be remiss of me not to mention the Dame Laura Cox report, which was a damning indictment of the culture of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in Parliament. With the report, and the working group led by the Leader of the House, we have seen just how pervasive the toxic culture of bullying and harassment is within Parliament and politics more widely. It is important that we recognise that not only MPs’ staff, but many staff who work in various capacities across the House and across Parliament, are on the receiving end of such behaviour.

The SNP fully accepts and supports the need for urgent change in this place, because ultimately, people should practise what they preach. We must set a gold standard for workplaces, and ensure that other businesses and sectors across the country can emulate and follow the guidance and practices that we implement here. In that regard, Parliament has lately let people down, but that can be rectified by challenging any form of workplace bullying and harassment, particularly in Parliament. Until we get that right, we are not in a position to preach or to tell anyone else how they should manage their workplace. By ensuring that everyone here works together with dignity and respect, we can start to change the workplace culture in this place, and we can start truly to lead by example.
As the hon. Member for Cambridge rightly highlighted, this subject touches on the lives of all people, whether they are LGBT, disabled, from faith backgrounds, of different races, young carers or looked-after children. It affects a wide variety of young people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, but I wanted to touch on a particular case, because when bullying is not tackled effectively there are tragic consequences.

That is what happened in the case of 12-year-old Rachel Steven from Burnbank in Hamilton, who attended St John Ogilvie High School, which happens to be my old high school. Although the school lies outside my constituency—in that of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Ged Killen)—I am sure he would support me in saying that I am particularly invested in this case.

St John Ogilvie High School was the school I grew up in, and I would like to think that any young person could aspire to come to this place too. Sadly, Rachel, who was described as a “lively, bright young girl” by her headteacher, took her own life in September this year. It is alleged that Rachel had been taunted by bullies for years, and for her to have taken such extreme action to escape the bullies shows just how difficult life can be for such victims. It is incumbent on us all to do our part to try to eradicate bullying, taking seriously any reports of bullying that come to us and remember how deeply such victims are affected, and that workplace culture is changed.

No one should be made to feel like that and no young person should take their own life to escape that experience. In an ideal world, no one would experience bullying. Let us seek to make that ideal a reality. In Parliament, we are responsible for implementing policy and legislation, and for leading by example. More could always be done to eradicate bullying, and we have more to do in this place. I hope that the Minister, in responding to this debate on Anti-bullying Week, will commit to what more he can do to ensure that bullying in schools and workplaces is eradicated, and that workplace culture is changed.

2.9 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, on quite a momentous day in Parliament. If I may tease the Minister gently, let me say that it is great to see at least one Minister left in place. When I came in today, I saw on social media the headline “May resigns”, but then I realised that it was about Paul May, chief executive of Patisserie Valerie—so the Minister can rest easy for a few more minutes.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Afia Hossain) on quite a momentous day in Parliament, which she spoke about, is a real gift.

There are two types of power: power over people and power with people. Power over people is the worst form of coercion that can be exercised by anyone, especially when it comes from elected officials. It has all the elements of bullying: it is aggressive, belittling and coercive. I am sure that the Minister agrees—as you do, Mr Bailey—that in this place we have to do more to root it out, because people should be treated with respect and dignity in the workplace.

To give an example, we display Parliament’s new anti-bullying policy in my constituency office in Manchester. It occasionally forms part of our team meeting, so that we can make sure that we treat one another and our constituents with respect and dignity, and that they treat us in the same way. We will neither kowtow to people who bully us, nor bully them. Poor behaviours should be pointed out. Many staff in this place have suffered horrendously over the past few years, and I look forward to the day when we take a more collegiate approach. It is not just about how we stop bullying, but about how we deal with it when it happens. How this mother of Parliaments cleans up its own act will be key.

The theme of this year’s Anti-bullying Week is “Choose Respect”. It is centred around the fact that bullying is a behaviour choice, and that children and young people can set a positive example by opting to respect each other at school, in their homes and communities and online. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for coming forward and sharing his own personal experience of bullying—seven years of being punched in the face, kicked down the stairs and mentally tortured so badly that he had three breakdowns. It was not until he was assaulted so badly that the police were called that he felt able, as a vulnerable teenager, to speak up.

As my hon. Friend’s personal story so eloquently portrays, bullying can be devastating for the victim. It permeates every minute of every single day, even when the victim is not in the presence of those who are causing them harm. Bullying is intensified when it happens in a school environment, because in any given school day there will be times when no teacher or staff member is present to spot it and stop it. Nor is it confined to physical space, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge points out: an estimated 5.43 million young people in the UK have experienced cyber-bullying, with 1.26 million subjected daily to extreme cyber-bullying.

The Department for Education’s guidance for schools, headteachers, staff and governing bodies on preventing and tackling bullying states:

“Every school must have measures in place to prevent all forms of bullying.”

However, does the Minister really think that schools can invest in strategies to prevent bullying, when across the country—including in the Prime Minister’s constituency—they are having to write to parents to ask for resources? As a result of cuts, they have fewer adults in the classroom to provide essential teaching support. Larger class sizes mean that children do not get as much attention as they used to.

I suspect that the Government do not have a statistical database, but statistics suggest that more than 16,000 young people are absent from school because of bullying. Bullying has a huge impact on young people’s self-esteem, and 30% of young people have gone on to self-harm as a result. Perhaps most devastatingly of all, 10% of young people have attempted to commit suicide as a result of bullying. The impacts of bullying continue to ripple out long after young people have escaped their tormentors; those who have been bullied are more than twice as likely to have difficulty in keeping a job or in committing to saving.

The sad reality is that some children who need mental health support as a result of bullying will leave school and move into adulthood without ever getting it, because
our mental health services are also in a funding crisis. Looked-after children are reported to experience bullying at a much higher rate than their peers. Almost every single looked-after child has already endured some form of trauma, and at least 45% enter care with a diagnosable mental health condition. As the Government are now presiding over the largest number of children in care since the 1980s—in March 2017 it reached 72,670—can the Minister explain what the Department for Education is doing to provide specialist support for them when they are subjected to bullying?

Children with disabilities or special educational needs also experience bullying at a higher rate than others, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge pointed out. The long-held view, which dates back right to the Education Act 1981 and is supported by Ofsted, is that well-resourced mainstream schools are best placed to improve the learning and social environment for disabled and non-disabled learners alike. Children with special educational needs are increasingly being pushed out of mainstream schools; recent figures suggest that 19,000 children were off-rolled between years 10 and 11, and the Government do not know where 10,000 of them went on to. In this day and age, when we are much more aware of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation, those figures are very worrying indeed.

In 2016, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child examined the Government’s compliance with the UN convention on the rights of the child and found that they were failing in 150 areas across the board. What has the Minister done to address that since the Committee’s report?

It is estimated that one child in every single class experiences severe bullying. I know that the Minister agrees that that is one child too many. Speaking as a former primary school teacher, I know that children will have woken up this morning feeling sick at the thought of going to school because of the fear of the damage that their bullies will wreak on them throughout the day. Some will never have made it to school at all, while others will have spent the whole day anxious and unable to concentrate in class.

We go into teaching because we believe in the value of education and in its power to create social mobility and ambition for all. I hope that the Minister will share with us how he intends to ensure that no child has to experience bullying, and that all children can reap the full benefits that a good education can provide. I hope that he will share in the theme of Anti-bullying Week by choosing respect our schools and teachers and giving them the resource and support that they need to beat the bullies.

2.18 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this debate. As he and all hon. Members present know, and as we have heard today, particularly from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), bullying can have a devastating effect on children and their families.

I offer my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Rachel Steven. Every death of a child is a tragedy. I cannot comment on Scottish procedure, but in England all child deaths, including suicides, will be reviewed by the local authority and the clinical commissioning group, which will analyse what has happened and ensure that any necessary recommendations or changes are made as a consequence of the tragedy.

We must not let up on our efforts to eradicate bullying. Anti-bullying Week gives us an opportunity to maintain focus on this important issue and highlight the positive things that we can all do to help stamp out bullying. Every child’s experience at school should be a happy one. We want schools to be safe, calm places in which teachers can teach uninterrupted and pupils can succeed.

The Government have sent a clear message to schools that bullying—for whatever reason—is unacceptable, and that they need the right tools to tackle it. As the hon. Member for Cambridge said in his opening remarks, all schools are legally required to have a behaviour policy with measures to prevent all forms of bullying. We have ensured that schools have a range of powers and support to help them respond effectively when bullying takes place.

We know that bullying still happens, and that it can have serious and long-lasting effects on children’s education and mental health. Tackling bullying means creating a culture where difference is respected and bullying behaviour is not tolerated by staff, pupils and parents. That is why the theme of this Anti-bullying Week—“Choose Respect”—is so important. There are pupils who are more likely to be targeted because of some young people’s attitudes towards those who are different from themselves, which is not the way it should be. That is why, earlier this year, the Department for Education announced an additional £1 million investment to extend projects led by several anti-bullying organisations until March 2020—the end of the spending review period. That work will support schools to stamp out prejudice and discrimination.

That investment will enable the Anti-Bullying Alliance, which does a phenomenal job, to extend its All Together programme, which focuses on reducing bullying of children with special educational needs and disabilities. It will support a further 300 schools to gain All Together status and provide certified online training for 10,000 professionals. The Anne Frank Trust will further develop its Free to Be debate programme, which encourages young people to think about the importance of tackling prejudice, discrimination and bullying. Over the 18-month extension, it will reach an additional 825 ambassadors and more than 8,000 workshop participants. The Diana Award will extend its peer-to-peer anti-bullying ambassadors programme, training an additional 2,750 young people from a further 270 schools in England over 18 months. As ambassadors, these young people will lead campaigns to empower their student body to have mutual respect for each other and to engage in good, anti-bullying practice.

Earlier this year we also extended the Internet Matters project, which will now run its Make a Noise programme until January 2019. That project supports the reporting of bullying to schools via the tootoot online platform. All four of our grant-funded projects include cyber-bullying as an integral element. The Minister for Women and Equalities announced a further £1 million to extend the anti-homophobic, biophobic and transphobic bullying programme, which has reached 1,200 schools since 2016.

I had the pleasure of attending the Anti-Bullying Alliance’s parliamentary reception in Speaker’s House yesterday, which I think the hon. Member for Cambridge
also attended. That event celebrated Anti-bullying Week and inspired an audience—including fellow Members of Parliament, policy makers, teachers and young people—to take action and unite against bullying. I was proud to present the Anti-Bullying Alliance school staff awards to two remarkable individuals who have gone above and beyond in their school to tackle and stop bullying: Mrs Watkiss from Blue Coat Church of England Academy, and Miss Durrant, a learning mentor from Emerson Valley School.

We know that schools that excel at tackling bullying have created an ethos of good behaviour, where pupils treat each other and staff with respect because they know that it is the right way to behave. This week, the Department for Education published a tool to support schools to develop whole-school approaches that promote respect and discipline. By providing practical advice, guidance and good practice examples of how schools can develop and implement an approach that is shared by the whole school community, the tool builds on the recommendations in Tom Bennett’s independent review of behaviour in schools, “Creating a culture: how school leaders can optimise behaviour”.

A good school culture that sets a clear structure and clear expectations for pupils can go hand in hand with acknowledging differences. A school where good behaviour and respect is the norm can help teachers to identify and support pupils who might have underlying problems, so alongside the tool we have published an update to our advice on mental health and behaviour in schools. This will help schools to identify pupils whose behaviour might result from an underlying mental health difficulty, and to direct schools towards information about how they can adapt their approaches to support those pupils’ individual needs within the context of an approach that is based on clear expectations of behaviour.

It is important also that a respectful school culture permeates every aspect of school life, including what is taught in the classroom. The new mandatory subjects of relationships education, relationships and sex education, and health education will enable schools to deliver high-quality teaching, including on acceptable ways to behave, both online and off, as part of their whole-school approach. The consultation on the draft guidance and regulations closed last week, and we are currently considering the responses; we plan to lay the regulations next year. Under the content for respectful relationships, the draft guidance sets out that pupils should know about the different types of bullying, the impact that it has, the responsibility of bystanders, and how to get help. As the hon. Member for Cambridge said, today is the first time that Anti-bullying Week has featured a dedicated anti-cyber-bullying day, which is supported by the Royal Foundation’s taskforce on the prevention of cyber-bullying. The aim of Stop Speak Support Day is to highlight the issue of cyber-bullying, which we know affects so many children in our schools, as the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) said. Cyber-bullying is not just a way to bully others anonymously; it can be a means by which face-to-face bullying between pupils at the same school is extended beyond the school day.

Bullying can also start online and follow a child into school. In these circumstances, the effects of cyber-bullying can be felt within the school. Just like face-to-face bullying, it can have repercussions on behaviour during lessons and throughout the school day. For that reason, the Department for Education has already put in place a number of powers and a range of support to enable schools to prevent and tackle cyber-bullying. Teachers have the power to discipline pupils for poor behaviour that takes place outside the school gates, and we have extended teachers’ searching powers so that they can search for and, in certain circumstances, delete inappropriate images or files on electronic devices.

Through the new mandatory subjects of relationships education and relationships and sex education, pupils will be taught about internet safety and harm, including the effects of their online actions on others and knowing how to recognise and display respectful behaviour online. This will complement the computing curriculum, which covers the principles of e-safety at all key stages. The content progresses to reflect the different and escalating risks that young people face, including how to use technology safely, responsibly, respectfully and securely, and where to go for help and support when students have concerns about content or contact on the internet or other online technologies.

We are committed to strengthening the teaching of computing and computer science in schools, so we have launched a new, comprehensive programme to improve the teaching of computing and to drive up participation in computer science, particularly amongst girls. This includes a new national centre for computing and a network of at least 40 hubs throughout the country to support schools to provide resources and training—including elements of e-safety—to primary and secondary schools. The centre will start working with schools this year, and it is backed by £84 million of new funding, which was announced in November 2017.

Children’s online life goes beyond what schools can control and influence. Their efforts need to be backed up by a responsible approach from those who provide social media, taking responsibility for what happens when children use their services. There is a range of other work taking place across Government to help tackle cyber-bullying, including the forthcoming joint White Paper from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Home Office, which sits at the heart of the Government’s response to tackling online harm. The White Paper will be published in the winter and sets out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures that detail how we will tackle online harms.

The hon. Member for Cambridge raised the issue of social media companies and the social media code of practice. As he knows, we published the draft code of practice in May and are continuing to engage with social media providers and others to refine the statutory practice with clear, overarching principles and separate best-practice guidance. Another key message of this year’s Anti-bullying Week is that bullying is a behaviour choice, as the hon. Member for Cambridge also mentioned. We want to ensure that all teachers are equipped with the skills to tackle the serious behaviour issues that compromise the safety and wellbeing of pupils, as well as the low-level disruption that too often gets in the way of effective teaching. We are reforming training so that all teachers will be shown in their first two years in the profession how to manage behaviour effectively. Last
month, we announced a £10 million programme to support schools to share best practice and knowledge on behaviour management and classroom management.

We know that bullying can have a serious effect on mental health. Children who suffer bullying can face higher rates of anxiety, depression and self-harm in adulthood. The Department has committed to supporting schools and colleges to promote good mental wellbeing in children, providing a supportive environment for those experiencing problems and securing access to more specialist help for those who need it. The Government’s response to the consultation on our green paper, “Transforming children and young people’s mental health provision”, confirmed our commitment to provide significant further support linked to schools. We will incentivise and support all schools and colleges to identify and train a designated senior lead for mental health, to deliver whole-school approaches to promoting better mental health. The Government will also fund new mental health support teams, or units, which will improve collaboration between schools and specialist services, providing a wider range of support and interventions in or near schools and colleges. These teams will be linked to groups of schools and colleges, and will work closely with other mental health professionals to assess and refer children for other specialist treatments if necessary.

I am grateful for the support that the hon. Member for Cambridge has given to this issue this year. The Government are committed to preventing and tackling bullying, but we know we cannot do that alone. We continue to work with schools and partner organisations to ensure that schools are a safe place for all. I am proud to be a supporter of Anti-bullying Week. I pledge to always choose respect, and I encourage other hon. Members to do the same.

2.32 pm

Daniel Zeichner: I thank colleagues for the positive, constructive tone of the debate and for the very thoughtful contributions. The contribution of the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) widened the issue to workplace bullying. The all-party parliamentary group on bullying, which I chair, concentrates very much on bullying in schools, but there is of course no doubt that what is learned at school will hopefully go forward in future and help us to do better, whether here or in other workplaces. I absolutely agree with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). The cases he raised should give us all pause for thought.

Most of all I congratulate the Anti-Bullying Alliance, led by Martha Evans and her colleagues at the National Children’s Bureau. This has become a major event each year for schools and is a fantastic opportunity, as I said in my opening comments, for constructive conversations of the kind that may not always be possible throughout the rest of the year. Today, given the discussions we are having about wider issues and the place of our country in the world, “Choose Respect” could not be a better way of promoting dialogue and constructive conversation. I am sure that on a cross-party basis we can agree to congratulate all those involved, to wish everyone well who has been involved in the campaign during the week, and to make sure that we do everything we can to eliminate bullying in schools and workplaces in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Anti-Bullying Week 2018.

2.34 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 19 November 2018

[SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair]

Leaving the European Union

4.30 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the e-petition relating to leaving the European Union.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. On behalf of 110,059 petitioners, I rise to present e-petition 219905, which states:

“If there is no agreement to leave the EU then Brexit must be stopped”.

I apologise to everyone if I need to stop and blow my nose. I am suffering with a cold and a cough but I will do my best to keep going.

It is an interesting time to introduce this debate, days after the Prime Minister made a statement to the House about a proposed withdrawal agreement, with statements from all parties and many individual MPs about whether the agreement would be acceptable, and also with the decision by EU members on ratification to come and so many uncertainties. Perhaps this is a good time to be listening to what our 110,000 petitioners feel.

As I arrived in my office today, news reached me of a walk-out by 200 young people from four schools in Northern Ireland, over what they say is the unwillingness of politicians in Westminster to address young people’s grave concerns about the draft Brexit deal. They are calling for a people’s vote.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech to open the debate. Does she agree that young people feel let down by the Brexit vote and that it is the duty of each of us to fight very hard for the future? Does she also agree that, in particular for people in Northern Ireland, where we only ever hear one side of the debate in the House, it is incumbent on each of us to listen very carefully to those young people in Northern Ireland?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. In the expectation that there may be other interventions, can we make them interventions and not speeches?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I certainly agree that we must listen to the voices of young people—I will talk about that in a moment—and that we need to have a full picture.

It is particularly relevant to note the walk-out today because the lead petitioner, Ciaran O’Doherty, is a young man, 15 years of age, who has given a lot of thought to the issue. I have been fortunate to receive a personal email from Ciaran, who lives in Northern Ireland and is very aware of the potential impact of leaving the European Union on his life and that of his family and friends. For him, the debate is not theoretical, but one he feels will have a real impact on his life. Brexit will, of course, affect all our lives, but there is an additional element here, with the focus on the Irish border. It is my job today to present the arguments on behalf of the petitioners and to press the Government on the points that the petition raises.

I would like to deal in turn with each of the matters that the petition raises. First, on deal or no deal, has an agreement been reached with the EU before the deadline for leaving? Then there is the impact of no deal on businesses; the impact of no deal on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on citizens; and the impact on EU citizens generally. The petitioners go on to say that if no deal has been reached Brexit should be stopped, because of how people, and particularly in Northern Ireland, would be adversely affected. The lead petitioner says that “leaving with no deal will be very bad for businesses and for the Irish border issue and for EU citizens living here.”

Taking each of the issues in turn, I hope to present the views of the petitioners and seek the Minister’s response.

First, on deal or no deal, has an agreement been reached with the European Union before the deadline for leaving? Do we have a deal or not? The petition is premised on the issue of whether we have a deal and, if so, on whether it addresses the concerns in the petition, particularly those relating to Northern Ireland. Over the next days and weeks there will be much debate in the House and elsewhere about whether the deal set out in the Prime Minister’s statement last Thursday and the provisions in the documents can be agreed. Judging from the long and heated questions following that statement, it appears unlikely that the current proposed withdrawal agreement will be accepted. For Labour, my party, it is clear that the deal fails to meet the six tests we have set out to protect, among other things, the economy, jobs and workers’ rights. Other parties and other Members have their own reasons for finding the deal unacceptable.

The question of the Northern Ireland border is key to the debate, and from where we stand now, it seems highly unlikely that when it comes to the vote in December the agreement will be approved—but, as they say, a week can be a long time in politics. I cannot read the minds of the petitioners, but I wonder whether their concerns for business, for peace in Northern Ireland and for European citizens living in the UK mean that many of them would find the proposed deal acceptable. What is absolutely clear is that they believe that no deal is such a concern that, in the event of that and of their concerns not being met, Brexit must be stopped.

On the impact of no deal on businesses, the petitioners are concerned about how leaving without a deal will affect business in the UK. Many businesses have expressed concern about the uncertainty about arrangements post-Brexit and also about what will happen if we leave the European Union without a deal. There are fears about disruption to just-in-time production methods hampering productivity, fears about transporting goods across borders and backlogs at customs controls, and fears about World Trade Organisation tariffs making businesses less competitive. Those are genuine concerns for many businesses and, of course, it is businesses that create and maintain jobs. The Government say that they are working hard to prepare for a no-deal scenario, but few people think that with less than five months to go before we leave the European Union all those issues can be properly addressed. The petitioners believe that if we face no deal we must stop Brexit.
Turning to the impact of no deal on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, it will be important to address businesses’ fear that no deal would result in a hard border, which could affect Northern Ireland’s future prosperity badly. Northern Ireland’s economy does not stop at the border and neither do the communities on the island. Any barriers may mean the disruption of trade, but they also mean disruption to how people have lived for generations, with families, and in some cases even houses, straddling the border. There is much talk of a technical solution to the customs issues, but does one really exist or are those just fine words that butter none of the metaphorical parsnips? Why is it that no other country in the world uses such technological workarounds, if they really exist and are fit for use? Most important of all is the concern of the lead petitioner and, I am sure, many of the petitioners, about what a hard border might mean for political stability and peace. It took a long time to get to the Good Friday agreement and to where we are today.

Ciaran tells me that he is not old enough to remember the troubles but that his parents do. He and they fear that leaving the EU without a deal will introduce a hard border and be a backward step if we wish to ensure that all people in Northern Ireland are able to live together peacefully. That is not just a concern of Ciaran’s; the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland recently expressed his concerns about the impact of a hard border. For Ciaran and other young people, who thankfully do not remember those earlier times, this must be a real worry and we owe it to them to settle the issue in a thoughtful way that does not put at risk the relative peace and stability of Northern Ireland and does not start to re-erect barriers—real or virtual—that could hamper that.

The petitioner are concerned about the impact of a no-deal Brexit on EU citizens already in the UK. EU citizens are a large part of our workforce in some sectors, and do a great job, whether in agriculture, health, social care or elsewhere. Many European Union citizens have already left the UK, fearing that they will be in a worse position if they stay here.

Catherine West: Does my hon. Friend agree that, just over the past 24 hours, two hospital trusts have reported that they are unable to staff their hospitals, and that that is directly influenced by the whole Brexit phenomenon?

Liz Twist: I agree with my hon. Friend that the fact that is already happening is of real concern.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that there are now more EU citizens working in the NHS than before the referendum decision?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I do not have the detailed knowledge, but I am aware from talking to people who work in the NHS that there is a great deal of concern about that situation.

Many European Union citizens have left the UK, and it cannot be right for them to be so worried that they will be unwelcome that they leave, rather than risk staying. The Government have said that European Union citizens living lawfully in the UK today will be able to stay, but they will need to register for settled status under a new scheme, which is not yet up and running. That is not what those people signed up for, and they are understandably worried about a new regulatory framework replacing what was free movement between the UK and other European Union countries. Of course, that works both ways.

I do not speak as a technical expert on the mechanics of Brexit, and I do not suppose that Ciaran is a technical expert either. However, he and over 110,000 petitioners—a number that was still growing as of yesterday evening—say that they have huge concerns about the impact of Brexit on the areas I have mentioned, and that if there is no deal, or a deal that cannot deliver assurances on all of those issues, Brexit should be stopped.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned technical experts on Brexit. If the past two and a half years have proven anything, it is that what technical experts on Brexit think does not mean very much. Does my hon. Friend mean that it is now absolutely imperative that, one way or another, the people of our country decide what happens next?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Certainly, the demonstration that took place in Northern Ireland expressed young people’s concern that there should be a chance for them to have their say, although I do not know Ciaran’s views on that.

Other people will have their own red lines on what must or must not be included in the agreement, but for the petitioners, the red lines are those I have talked about. Because the petition is an e-petition, the Government have already responded to it, and I am sure we will hear more from the Minister. The Government said: “We are leaving the EU. That’s what the British public voted for and that is what we will deliver.”

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a brilliant job of explaining the petition in layman’s terms, but does she accept that it is a rather binary choice? “If there is no agreement, then Brexit should be stopped” puts things in rather stark terms? We know that there is an outline agreement, but we do not know that there is going to be agreement about it in this House. There is a third way, which is to give the good old general British public a people’s vote on whether the deal is acceptable or whether we should remain.

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which I think covers a point that we looked at before. Certainly, the petitioners say that they have real concerns and that there should be a provision to stop Brexit, I am summarising what the Government have said, and I am sure that the Minister will address more fully some of the points that have been made.

The Government say: “We have already carried out very significant ‘no deal’ preparations and have been publishing a series of notices so that businesses and citizens have time to prepare.”

They say that their objectives are “to minimise disruption and to prioritise continuity and stability, including for businesses... as well as for EU citizens”.

They will “continue working closely with industries that are most affected by ‘no deal’ plans and implementation” and “continue to apply highly automated, risk based and intelligence targeted customs controls when the UK leaves the EU.”
The Government say that the Prime Minister gave a “clear commitment” to EU citizens when she said:

“I couldn’t be clearer: EU citizens living lawfully in the UK today will be able to stay.”

Notwithstanding those confident assurances, I suspect that the petitioners will not feel confident that their concerns will be addressed sufficiently. I have no doubt that they would wish me to press the Minister on their behalf to fully address their concerns today, and recognise the fears that they have for the future.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Bearing in mind what has happened with the Home Office over the Windrush scandal, many constituents who are EU citizens have come to me, saying that they are very concerned about how the new scheme might operate. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Home Office is neither resourced nor ready to deal with all of the settled status applications?

Liz Twist: I do indeed share my hon. Friend’s concerns, especially as in preparation for this speech, I looked on the website to see the proposals. It all looked fine until I came to the bits that said, “More information will be posted.” We are getting very near, and for those who are in the position of having to apply, it must be a real concern that the full information is not yet available and the process has not begun.

The petitioners have raised their concerns, and the petition continues to attract signatures even as we speak. Those concerns are “deal or no deal”; whether an agreement with the EU has been reached before the deadline; the impact of no deal on businesses; the impact of no deal on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and what that means for citizens; and the impact on EU citizens. As I have said, the petitioners say that if no deal has been reached, and their concerns have not been properly dealt with and safeguards have not been given, Brexit should be stopped. I have not gone into the technicalities of what constitutes a deal, how it is reached, meaningful votes, or whatever. My job today has been to give the petitioners a voice on the very real issues that concern them, and I hope that I have done so.

I have therefore moved e-petition 219905 on behalf of Ciaran and over 110,000 petitioners, which states:

“If there is no agreement to leave the EU then Brexit must be stopped.”

4.46 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. Needless to say, I am opposed to remaining in the European Union, and Brexit must not be stopped. A huge majority of my colleagues—544 MPs—voted in favour of the European Union Referendum Bill, 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU, 494 MPs voted to trigger article 50, and 60% of my constituents voted to leave.

There can be no doubt that the British people and their representatives in the House of Commons think that Brexit should go ahead. We made a promise; now let us stick to that promise. The referendum question said nothing about the possibility that we would have a so-called people’s vote. The referendum on 23 June 2016 was the people’s vote: it gave the British people the opportunity finally to have a say on our future relationship with the EU. The people spoke, and we have to listen. The referendum question said:

“Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”

That language was approved by the independent Electoral Commission. The question was clear, and the people voted to leave the European Union by a sizeable margin.

The risk to the UK’s trade after Brexit has been much exaggerated, much as the immediate aftermath of a leave vote was exaggerated by Government and business. The British people were promised rapidly rising unemployment, an emergency Budget, and untold horrors by those who supported remain in 2016.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: Sorry, but I will carry on. The reality has been quite different, with a thriving economy, the fastest wage growth in a decade, record low unemployment and record high job vacancies. Why on earth would the British people believe “Project Fear 2”, which has been rolled out by those who seek to undermine the will of the British people? No agreement with Europe will not mean an end to trade; that is a simply ridiculous argument.

In 1980, the EU’s share of world GDP was about 30%. In 2017, it was about 16%, and by 2022, it is expected to fall further to 15%.

Dr Huq: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: Sorry, but I will carry on. The EU has a shrinking share of world trade, and Brexiteers can see the benefits of trading freely with the rest of the world, which is growing at a much faster rate than the EU.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: No, I am going to carry on. You have plenty of people on your side who can give way to you.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. For the record, there is nobody on my side. I stand alone in debates.

Andrea Jenkyns: I apologise, Sir Roger.

If we were to go on to World Trade Organisation rules when we leave, we would be trading under the same terms as the USA already does with us. Tariffs would average only 3%. Some tariffs on exports would be higher, but some goods would still be exempt completely. The WTO has about 160 members, accounting for 90% of world trade. We would still trade regardless of whether we leave the EU on WTO rules or with a trade agreement. We are the world’s fifth largest economy. We are one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. We have the best universities in the world and the most resourceful and amazing people. The UK will always succeed. I am confident we will prosper.

Jo Stevens: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: I will not.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?
Andrea Jenkyns: I am carrying on. The biggest benefit to us leaving on WTO rules is our freedom to sign our own free trade deals with the rest of the world, such as with the world’s largest economy—the USA—and with the economic powerhouses of tomorrow, such as India. It has the added benefit of meaning we would also keep the £39 billion.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: No, I will not.

Tom Brake: On a point of order, Sir Roger, can you give us some guidance? It would be really helpful for Members to know whether the hon. Lady has written a letter to the chair of the 1922 committee calling on the Prime Minister to go, but she will not take any interventions. Can you help us try to determine the answer to that question?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I am sure the whole Chamber would be absolutely fascinated to know that, but as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware—he has been here for a very long time—it is not a matter for the Chair.

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you, Sir Roger. Under WTO rules, we will be in control of our own destiny and we will be able to deliver on the Prime Minister’s promise to be a free trade champion and to be a truly global Britain, unlike under the PM’s current deal.

As a Conservative, I believe in the benefits of free trade. I want to see free trade with the rest of the continent that is as liberal as possible, but that cannot come at the expense of breaking the promise made to the British people at the referendum, or by my party or Her Majesty’s Opposition in our manifestos. Trust in Parliament and politicians and political institutions. The level of mistrust and scepticism has increased and I have grave concerns that if we do not deliver—if Brexit is stopped—that trust will erode further.

In November 2017, Ipsos MORI undertook a poll of trust in professions. Public trust in politicians was only 17%, which is truly damning. To put that into context, nurses were trusted by 94% of people. The ordinary man in the street was trusted by 64%. Bankers were trusted by 38% and professional footballers were trusted by 26%. We need to reverse that shocking trend and stopping Brexit will certainly not do that—quite the opposite. Some 70% of Conservative seats and 61% of Labour constituencies voted to leave the EU and they will not trust us again if we remain in the European Union.

It is also important to note that there is not and never was an option to keep the status quo. The EU is a project that supports deeper integration, and it is not clear on what terms Britain’s membership would be, even if the anti-democratic “stop Brexit” campaigners got their way. For example, would the UK remain an EU member state on its existing terms with opt-ins, opt-outs, a budget rebate and so on? If the UK were to remain, it has been suggested that we could end up paying more money to the EU budget. One of the pledges of the referendum was to take back control of our money. Those suggesting that Brexit should be stopped are essentially suggesting that they would be willing to pay more in and get less back. Good luck to them in selling that to their constituents. Our hard-fought rebate was a famous victory for Margaret Thatcher; Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair gave away a huge chunk of the rebate for nothing. To remain in the EU following the largest democratic decision in our nation’s history would be an outrage, but to pay more into the EU’s budget for the pleasure would be a catastrophe.

Not everyone here today will agree on whether our relationship with the EU is positive or negative, but we should all be able to agree that we are united under our democratic ideals and our British principle of fair play. Referendums are extremely rare under our constitution and even if they are not necessarily constitutionally binding, it would be unthinkable for the UK Parliament to overrule a referendum. I sincerely hope that that never happens, and I would always oppose such a move.

If the Opposition parties had won the 2011 referendum on our voting system or the 2014 referendum on Scotland’s independence, how would they and their supporters have felt if Parliament had rejected or overturned the result? That is the situation that this petition supports. It is wrong and simply un-British.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: No, I am nearly finished.

As politicians, we reap what we sow. If we ignore and discard the will of the people, the people will rightly discard us.

Martin Whitfield: On a point of order, Sir Roger, how can we get on the record that not everyone who sits on the Opposition Benches necessarily agreed with the indication of the vote mentioned by the hon. Lady?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, that is not a point of order for the Chair, but I think he has achieved his objective.

Andrea Jenkyns: SNP Members are particularly keen to overturn the referendum result, and I suggest they be cautious about setting that dangerous precedent. Their sole purpose is independence for Scotland; I do not support that, nor does Scotland, but nevertheless let us imagine Parliament overturning a yes vote. That would simply be wrong. We are leaving the EU. It is what the British public voted for and what we must deliver. If we do not, more is at stake than simply keeping the status quo; we will erode trust in our democracy.

4.56 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The petition, signed by more than 100,000 people, states that if the Government fail to reach an agreement with the EU by the deadline, Brexit should be stopped. After last week’s chaos, who can blame those who signed it? Tory infighting is usually something I would welcome, because it is fun to watch blue on blue, but Brexit transcends party politics. We have 130 days left before we crash out of the EU, and we do not know what we are going to do. In responding to the petition, it is time that we ditched our divisions and looked at the facts, because they are shocking. We have no majority for the Northern Ireland backstop, no majority for a deal that makes us a rule-taker, and no majority for a withdrawal agreement that leaves 3 million EU citizens facing unacceptable limbo.
At the heart of my support for the petition is the case of EU nationals. Some 22,000 EU nationals live in Hampstead and Kilburn, and it is in defence of their rights that I rise to speak. These are not people who have the right to vote for me. This is not about politics; it is about the fact that they have lived in the community for years and years. This is their home. They make an unquantifiable contribution to our community, our NHS, our businesses and our creative sectors.

Peter Grant: Does the hon. Lady share the Welsh and Scottish Governments’ view that the Prime Minister’s comments about queue jumping at the weekend were deeply offensive, and should play no part in a civilised debate about our future immigration policy?

Tulip Siddiq: I agree, and I thank the hon. Gentleman. I also go against all our British values of welcoming people. Does she agree that it is ridiculous that someone has to leave the country for five years. As the hon. Member for years and years. This is their home. They make an unquantifiable contribution to our community, our NHS, our businesses and our creative sectors.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): On that point, does the hon. Lady agree that it is ridiculous that some children born in this country to EU nationals from other parts of the EU who have been here for decades now have to apply to stay in their home, and will have to undergo systematic criminality checks.

Tulip Siddiq: I agree that that is absolutely ridiculous. It also goes against all our British values of welcoming people.

In the Prime Minister’s CBI speech, EU migrants were told that they would lose their place in the queue for employment opportunities. We are at a pivotal point in our history. Do we want to become a Trumpian society in which we demonise migrants and do not make them feel welcome? Or do we want to go back to the British values of welcoming people to this country, as refugees or migrants, because of the contribution that they make to our country? Does what the Prime Minister has outlined sound like the protection of existing rights? My residents in Hampstead and Kilburn do not think so. I will illustrate my point with the example of two of the 22,000 EU nationals living there.

Sarit from Hampstead town is an EU doctor. In a year, he does 2,000 NHS surgeries. He said that Brexit is a threat to his work in the UK. I went through a very difficult childbirth two years ago on the NHS, and every single doctor, nurse and midwife who treated me was from the EU. There has been a 96% drop in the number of EU nurses applying to work in our NHS. Georgia, a Cypriot constituent, has lived in my constituency since 2003. She wrote to me of her fears about the new reticence of firms in Canary Wharf to hire EEA citizens.

The official Vote Leave statement said on 1 June 2016:

“There will be no change for EU citizens already lawfully resident”.

They “will be treated no less favourably than they are at present.”

With that clearly no longer the case, we can add the betrayal of EU citizens’ rights to the long list of betrayals that have led to an undeniable shift in public opinion.

Hon. Friends have mentioned the people’s vote. A Sky News poll on 15 November asked whether voters would support or oppose a referendum to choose between the draft Brexit deal, no deal, or remain, and 55% were in support of a people’s vote. In a YouGov poll, 59% of respondents said that they now support a people’s vote. The change in opinion is clear, and as parliamentarians we have a duty to act on that change, and on the failure to achieve a deal.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady referred to the withdrawal agreement. Does she accept the opinion of Unionists that no Unionist can support a plan that gives Brussels more say than the UK Parliament over trade and rules in Northern Ireland? How can anyone in this House support a plan that draws a regulatory border down the Irish sea, and support the withdrawal agreement? Does she feel our angst and our annoyance at what is happening?

Tulip Siddiq: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Perhaps the Minister can answer that question, as well as my long list of questions. Have the promises of Vote Leave materialised? If not, should not the public be given another say on the deal that is reached? Does the draft deal stand a chance of passing through the Commons, in the light of dissent from across the House? If not, should not the public be given another say on the deal that is reached?

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend is making a convincing case for people having changed their minds. Two years ago, the Conservative party chose a leader, yet some people in that party now want to choose another leader. They do not want that leader set in stone for two years. To draw a parallel, people have changed their minds on this subject. There should be an opportunity to see whether the will of the people is still the will of the people.

Tulip Siddiq: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that the leader goes on another holiday, so that we have an opportunity to choose another leader for the country.

Does the Minister believe that a no-deal scenario, with all the chaos that it will cause, is a viable path for our country? If not, should not the public be given a say on the deal that cannot be reached? It has for some time been clear to me, and thousands in my constituency, that the Government do not have the answers, so ultimately the people should be given the opportunity to vote again.

Jo Stevens: Given that voters found out only last Wednesday what they apparently voted for in 2016, the only proper democratic course of action is to put the Prime Minister’s proposal to the public by way of a people’s vote, and to see whether they want to accept that or remain in the EU. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Tulip Siddiq: When we went to the ballot box on that fateful June day, there was only one question on the ballot paper: “Do you want to leave the European Union or not?” All those people arguing that it became a proxy vote on immigration—I agree that it was—and about all the other associations with the vote should remember that. It was not a sensible way to run a referendum that I did not agree with in the first place.
Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Historically in this country we have only ever had one question on the ballot paper. How easy will it be for such a referendum to include more than one question?

Tulip Siddiq: History will probably show that we did not always get it right. I am not resistant to change. It is because I respect democracy that I think we need a people’s vote. I respect people’s opinions and the right to change one’s mind once a decision has been taken. Democracy in the UK did not begin and end with the referendum in 2016, and it certainly does not end after two years of shoddy negotiations by the Government, after which we do not know what will happen in 130 days. Given the Government’s failure to bring home a deal that can command widespread support in the House, it is high time that we parliamentarians trusted the British public to have their say and vote again.

5.6 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I must start by saying to the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) that people often do not trust politicians because they fail to answer questions, or, in her case, fail to accept the question posed in the first place. It would have been helpful if she had answered some of the questions when people sought to intervene. If she wants to intervene on me, I am very happy to give way to her or anyone else during the debate. Perhaps she did not want to take any interventions because she felt her arguments were rather weak.

The past week has been an absolute shambles. Anyone—in the United Kingdom or elsewhere—who looked at our Government and what they are doing with Brexit could not think anything but that this is a most depressing spectacle of a Government completely out of control destroying the best interests of the United Kingdom. What is happening is nothing to do with national interest, but everything to do with the Tory party interest. Who will be the next leader? What particular version of Brexit will be delivered by the Government?

Earlier there was an exchange about whether the country knew what it was voting for two and a half years ago. Clearly, it cannot have done. The Prime Minister has set out her deal, which has promptly been rubbish by a large number of her own MPs who think a different deal is what people wanted. The public are justified in not knowing what was offered to them two and a half years ago, because the Tory party does not know now what should be offered to the people.

I will not give the time of day to the bluffers in that party who believe that no deal is manageable. Some actually believe that. The Government have done a good job of setting out precisely what the impact of no deal would be, but some say, “Well, it would lead to a few transitional problems”. I suspect those people are sitting on family fortunes large enough not to be disturbed by the slight transitional problems that might occur if a no deal is what happens. Although the Prime Minister said she would not, I think Ministers should make some contingency plans for what happens if there is no Brexit. I hope that that is where we end up.

The opening speech and later contributions have set out the impact of no deal on EU citizens in the UK who are already demoralised and disturbed by what is happening about their futures here. Also, UK citizens in the EU are all too often completely forgotten in this process. I am getting reports from places such as France where UK citizens who have been long-term residents are being asked to go to a place many miles away from where they live to fill in forms that they have not had to fill in before, and they are very worried. Sometimes they are very elderly, and they do not know what is happening. If they have read some of the laws being prepared for the French Senate, they should be worried. They should also be worried about what French employers are being told about what they have to do to prepare for no deal and the checks that they might have to carry out on UK citizens. We seem to have completely neglected the interests of those citizens in this process.

Those who are arguing that no deal is manageable clearly have not spent much time with many businesses. Everyone I talk to, whether in the haulage industry, the pharmaceutical sector, universities or the NHS, is very concerned by the suggestion that no deal is a possibility. Some have already made costly investments to try to cope with it, such as ensuring that they have cold storage available for medicines. Some have made the preparations. The largest companies could probably cope with no deal, but smaller ones would not be able to. Many companies that operate with small margins will probably go to the wall if they suddenly find that the relationship that they had with a supplier in the EU no longer functions as a result of there being no deal. If we end up in a no-deal scenario, people such as the Minister and the Brexitors will have to explain to those companies why they have been put out of business.

I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood is at least here. At least she has had the nerve to come and attempt to defend the policy that she supported. Where are the others? Where are those who have been so prominent in saying that this is a brilliant deal for the UK that will deliver fantastic benefits in terms of trade deals and so on? Incidentally, I have found it hard to identify any company that thinks that there will be a huge trade deal out there for them. Companies that already export very successfully around the world are saying to me, “I’m not quite sure what this trade deal will give me that I don’t already have, because I’m already trading successfully around the world. I worry that the very successful trade that I do with the EU will be damaged as a result of what the Government are doing.”

We need to establish whether the article 50 process can be stopped. There is no point in trying to cancel the process before 29 March, as the petition suggests, if that is not possible. That is why the Wightman case, which seeks to establish whether article 50 can be revoked, and with which I am peripherally involved, is critical. The Government have said, “It’s a hypothetical question. We’re not going to revoke article 50, therefore we’re not going to tell you what our legal advice on the subject is.” I think that Ministers are entitled to know whether article 50 can be revoked. If we get to 29 March 2019 without a deal, I suspect that everyone in the Chamber will want to know the answer to that question. Ministers will no longer be able to hide behind the words: “It’s a hypothetical question. You’re not entitled to know the answer.”

Martin Whitfield: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that although the Government are not prepared to release their legal papers, they seem to want to appeal the decision to refer the case to the European Court of Justice?
Tom Brake: Absolutely. The Government do not want us to go to the ECJ to get clarification. Regrettably, they are keen to block such action so that we cannot know the answer. The Government have five QCs working on the case, including the top two QCs in the country. If I were to like to see the bill that the Government will get for trying to hide from Members of Parliament whether article 50 is revocable, because that is what they are trying to do. I think that is incredibly reprehensible.

Lib Dem party policy is that if we reach 29 March without a deal we will seek to revoke article 50 unilaterally. The Government have set out the consequences of no deal in the technical notes, and those consequences are so dire that we need to have such a stop gap to prevent us from falling over the cliff. I am afraid I must briefly touch on Labour party policy. It seems to me that the Labour party has more obstacles than the grand national that have to be crossed or cleared before it will come out formally to support a people’s vote. I know some in the Chamber on the Labour Benches will not support one, but others have already stated their support.

We need to hear from the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson today whether the Labour party will support a people’s vote, because we will quickly get to the vote on the deal. If the Government dare to introduce the motion that was so soundly rejected by people such as the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood, there will be an amendment calling for a people’s vote. Then the Labour party, which has been playing a little dance—more dances than “Strictly”—will have to come clean to the public, its own Members of Parliament, its own supporters and the large number of people who have joined the party in recent years about whether it will support a people’s vote or will, in fact, aid and abet the Government in crashing us out of the European Union.

Catherine West: Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify whether the Liberal Democrats were split two or three ways on the vote on article 50?

Tom Brake: I assure the hon. Lady that we will certainly not split three ways. One Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament has some reservations, but I am confident that between now and the vote he will have changed his position, and will fall in line with the position that the party has overwhelmingly adopted.

Catherine West: Three ways.

Tom Brake: No—that is potentially two ways, but I am confident that we will all be going through the same Division Lobby for this vote. I hope that the Leader of the Labour party will join us. We know that we will end up with either the Government’s deal or no deal if the Labour Front-Bench team does not support a people’s vote. I hope that they will.

Dr Drew: It is not either/or. The question is whether they will support a call for a general election. That is the obvious way to resolve this.

Tom Brake: The idea that there will be a general election is one of the obstacles that the Labour party has put in the way of supporting a people’s vote. The only circumstances in which a general election would happen would be, first, if the Prime Minister said, “I want a general election.” We all remember what happened the last time she decided to call one—it did not go very well, so it is unlikely that she will do that.

The other circumstance would be if there were a vote of no confidence, which would probably require the Government’s friends from the Democratic Unionist party to support it. The DUP would be looking at the Leader of the Labour party potentially becoming the Prime Minister. I suspect that the DUP would not want to facilitate that. If the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) wants to intervene and confirm that they would support a vote of no confidence, this is his moment. He is sitting on his backside, and clearly does not want to confirm that this afternoon.

Clearly there are almost as many Tory party policies on where the Government should be going as there are Back Benchers. I do not know whether Tory Back Benchers have an official position on whether they would seek to revoke article 50 if we reached 29 March without a deal, or whether they are happy for us to go over the cliff. I guess we will have to wait and see. One clear element of Tory policy is to blame everyone but the Government for the debacle unravelling in front of us.

A procession of very senior ex-Ministers has appeared on television in the last couple of months. One such ex-Minister said, “I’m our man in Washington and I’ll be able to secure a free trade deal with the US in three months.” The same person spent two years trying to negotiate the deal with the European Union and had to walk away. The outgoing Secretary of State for the Department for Exiting the European Union is also seeking to blame the Europeans for bullying the Government. I recall that he was one of a number who said that Brexit would be simple and straightforward, that the EU would give us everything that we wanted, and that it would all be done almost overnight. The reality is that he has failed. There was never any chance that the sort of Brexit that he and some other prominent Brexeters claimed was deliverable would be delivered for the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman always gives way, even though we hold practically opposite opinions. What has made the difference is the backstop down the Irish sea, which is why the former Brexit Secretary took the principled decision to resign his position, as others have done. It makes the whole withdrawal agreement more unacceptable. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that from where we stand as Unionists, things have moved beyond the pale, so we will have to make our decisions accordingly whenever a withdrawal agreement comes before the House?

Tom Brake: Clearly, and rightly, the hon. Gentleman will take the decision that his party feels is appropriate, although I am sure he will also want to bear it in mind that Northern Ireland voted to stay in the European Union. I hope he will factor that into his considerations.

Jim Shannon: Northern Ireland is only part of the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, along with Scotland, Wales and the rest. The decision was made collectively. For the record, my constituency voted by 56% to 44% to leave. I understand that across Northern Ireland the majority opinion was different, but throughout the whole United Kingdom the vote was clear. We all want to leave and we will leave it together, not in parts.
Tom Brake: I was not suggesting that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency had voted to remain, but I am pleased that he acknowledges that the overall picture in Northern Ireland is that people voted to remain in the European Union. What he says confirms something that some people realised at the outset, two and a half years ago, which is that frankly there was no solution to the Northern Ireland border problem. Some of those who claimed wrongly that there was a solution were former Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, who should have understood the import of it and known better. I do not think that there is any mileage in the technical solutions that are being proposed. Yes, technical solutions can be part of the answer, but it is not clear to me how we can find a technical solution to any checks that will have to happen, particularly occasional checks of the contents of vehicles.

Jim Shannon: Last week, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs heard expert opinions from representatives from Holland and Switzerland about how the technological method would work. May I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman reads the transcript of the evidence from those two experts, which will give him an indication of exactly how it will work?

Tom Brake: I am sure that the credentials of the hon. Gentleman’s experts are sound, but at an event yesterday I sat next to a businessman who trades all over the European Union. He pointed out how much more difficult it is to trade with Switzerland: it required HMRC to come into his business to check the validity of the paperwork for a £1,400 order. Differences clearly exist between the trading models that apply around the European Union, so it is not enough simply to say we should adopt the approach or the technology of Switzerland, where I understand that checks are still conducted not at the border, but some distance away.

I really should conclude my speech. If we get to 29 March without a deal, I think our stopgap should be to revoke article 50. I hope that the European Court of Justice will confirm that that can be done. If we do not revoke article 50, every single Member of Parliament should face their constituents on 30 March and every single day to revoke article 50, every single Member of Parliament should face their constituents on 30 March and every single day to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to speak in this debate.

When is a deal not a deal? When is an agreement just a draft agreement? Here we are, two years after trigger the referendum, East Lothian voted by 64.6% to 34.4% to remain in the European Union. That overwhelming majority was reflected across the whole of Scotland. I grant that it was not the view of the whole United Kingdom, but people are very worried about a no-deal Brexit, which is a distinct possibility threatening us if the Prime Minister is unable to get her deal through Parliament in a meaningful vote.

The petition realistically encapsulates the political stalemate between our political Executive and the legislature. Ministers have spent the weekend pushing the idea that this deal is better than no deal. That is a false dichotomy. I remember a time when no deal was better than a bad deal. Hope and expectation rather than cold facts have driven decision makers into this position. At what stage should we hold to account those who promised that such a utopia was down the road, but instead delivered a dog’s dinner—or a dog’s Brexit-fast? It is nonsense to suggest that a democratic decision is binding for ever. People are entitled to change their mind when they find out the facts and when democratic legitimacy is questioned. If no democratic decision could be revisited, Parliament as an institution would be defunct.

Catherine West: What is my hon. Friend’s view of the facts that have emerged about how the election was run, particularly the £8 million of electoral funding?

Martin Whitfield: It is interesting that as more and more facts become apparent, people’s confidence in politicians seems to be attacked again and again. We seem to fail not only to recognise what has happened in the past, but to offer any way out. What is required is to recover that trust by looking into our constituents’ eyes and saying, “We can sort it.” Whether we leave with a deal or no deal, it is a betrayal of our young people, our communities, our farmers, manufacturers and industry, and our working people. It is a betrayal of people young and old in my constituency of East Lothian.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the timber industries, I refer to my registered interests—I am seriously concerned about the impact of no deal on the timber sector. Last week, I had the privilege of meeting representatives from the Irish timber industry, who spoke about the chaos that could come their way in a no-deal Brexit. They also spoke about the strength of an industry that, over its time in Europe, has created a way of dealing and doing business that means that a piece of wood purchased in B&Q may have started life in the Republic of Ireland, been felled and cut in Northern Ireland, and been transported across the border to be ready in the shop for the purchaser. The additional logistical costs to timber importers will affect not only small businesses across the supply chain, but the wider construction industry, which will play havoc with the Government’s timid housing proposals.

Such worries are spread across every industry. There is a disconcerting sense that the Government believe that they have reached a good deal because they have a seven-page document about the future, but it offers no more certainty or security than a catastrophic no-deal scenario. Neither option provides the certainty or security that my constituents demand, but there is another answer.

5.24 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to speak in this debate.

When is a deal not a deal? When is an agreement just a draft agreement? Here we are, two years after triggering article 50, and Parliament now has before it a document of 500-plus pages that sets out how we will go about leaving the European Union, and a seven-page political declaration about our future beyond that point. It is almost as if we had a technical drawing of the taxi that we will get there in—it might have only three wheels and some of us might not be able to get out at the end, but we will still enjoy ourselves—and only a bland sketch on the back of a napkin of what it will look like where we are going.

That is the context of the petition before us today, which I support and which has been signed by 206 of my constituents. Is it a cry for help—a cry for sense? In the referendum, East Lothian voted by 64.6% to 34.4% to remain in the European Union. That overwhelming majority was reflected across the whole of Scotland. I grant that it was not the view of the whole United Kingdom, but people are very worried about a no-deal Brexit, which is a distinct possibility threatening us if the Prime Minister is unable to get her deal through Parliament in a meaningful vote.

The petition realistically encapsulates the political stalemate between our political Executive and the legislature. Ministers have spent the weekend pushing the idea that this deal is better than no deal. That is a false dichotomy. I remember a time when no deal was better than a bad deal. Hope and expectation rather than cold facts have driven decision makers into this position. At what stage should we hold to account those who promised that such a utopia was down the road, but instead delivered a dog’s dinner—or a dog’s Brexit-fast? It is nonsense to suggest that a democratic decision is binding for ever. People are entitled to change their mind when they find out the facts and when democratic legitimacy is questioned. If no democratic decision could be revisited, Parliament as an institution would be defunct.
I believe that, if asked, the people of East Lothian would vote as they did last time—to stay in Europe—but this time it would be a vote for no Brexit.

Let me flesh out my concerns about the no-deal Brexit that will happen if, as expected, the political impasse between the Prime Minister and Parliament cannot be broken. Each impact of leaving without a deal is far worse than not leaving at all—the very essence of the young gentleman’s petition. A no-deal Brexit would put us on WTO terms, which would introduce tariffs and strict standards, potentially blocking businesses from trading across the whole of Europe. We should not leave the EU for that. We would lose frictionless border crossing by people and equipment, and we would lose on-time delivery for manufacturing. We should not leave the EU for that. It would hamper and harm our environment. We should not leave the EU for that. A no-deal Brexit would threaten lose on-time delivery for manufacturing. We should not leave the EU for that. It would hamper and harm our environment. We should not leave the EU for that. A no-deal Brexit would put the Union at risk. We should not leave the EU for that.

5.30 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I thank the Petitions Committee for bringing forward this debate and allowing us to consider, with only months to go, what the impact of a no-deal Brexit would be on this country. I have to admit that, in eight years in Parliament, I have never been more worried—not just about the potential impact on this country, but about the state of British politics and our apparent inability to listen to one another, to work constructively together and to find a way out of this mess.

Although I understand the passion and sincerity with which people have conducted themselves, this debate has drawn attention to many of the reasons why we are unable to find a way through this mess: entrenched positions, more talking than listening, and the repeated use by a number of people of the word “betrayal”, which only a few years ago was reserved for people on the far right but now seems to be part of our modern lexicon, with hugely damaging results. Our political debate has become angry, divisive and violent at the exact time that we should be taking a lead in trying to calm this down.

It is in that spirit that I congratulate the young man, Ciaran O’Doherty, for the way he has put together and presented this petition, because the real human implications of what we potentially are about to do to people like him must be heard and considered by all of us. Should Parliament not reach agreement either on this withdrawal agreement or on an alternative course of action in a few months’ time, and if the Government do not sit up, listen and take action, we will leave without a deal. I share the view of many colleagues who have spoken today: that would be an absolute disaster for this country.

I am really concerned to hear—from Opposition Members as well as Government Members—the idea that a no-deal Brexit is a political hoax. I share the view of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that many of the people who are pushing the idea that no deal would not be a problem or that, somehow, it cannot happen are incredibly protected (Tom Brake) that many of the people who are pushing the idea that no deal would not be a problem or that, somehow, it cannot happen are incredibly protected from the impact of those decisions. They are wealthier and more privileged, have more access to power in all its forms, and have options for what they and their families do next. I want to put on record that for the vast majority of people whom I represent, the situation is much more terrifying than that. For all the anger and bluster in Parliament, the thing I hear most from my constituents as we approach the deadline in March 2019 is genuine anxiety about what will happen to them, their jobs and their children’s future.

As this debate becomes angrier and angrier as we get closer to the deadline, and as we continue to talk past one another and to lecture one another about what is in the moral interest of this country, I say to colleagues who make a very passionate case for a second referendum that my in-box in Wigan is filling up with messages from people who tell me that they voted leave, that they want the result to be respected, and they now want no deal at all with the European Union. That is a much stronger assertion even than just a few months ago, when it felt like the debate was starting to calm down. The debate has become angrier, and those people have decided that they want to raise their voices loudly at this time and set us on a disastrous course for them, their families and my community, because they feel that that small bit of control that they exerted two and half years ago is in danger of being taken away.

To my colleagues who sincerely and passionately make the case for a second referendum, I say that that is only part of the solution. If they genuinely want to heal the divisions in this country and provide a sustainable future, this cannot be a tug of war between two groups of people who cannot co-exist. Democracy is not the tyranny of the majority; the 48% and the 52% must be heard. This is their country, and the future must belong to both groups.

Tom Brake: I wonder whether the hon. Lady welcomes the fact that those people involved in the people’s vote campaign, which includes Members from all political parties apart from the DUP, are actively working to draw up an offer that would address the legitimate concerns that leave voters had? Should we get into a people’s vote campaign, we can then say that these are the things that we would do to address some of the key concerns that people who voted leave had—it would not address all concerns—about things such as investment in infrastructure, skills, training and quality jobs.

Lisa Nandy: Having had some quite tough words for people making that case, it is right to acknowledge how positive that contribution is and how important that work is. I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that if the starting point for a campaign is that “you are wrong, and we are right”, it is very unlikely to get a hearing. I can see some hon. Members shaking their head, and I accept that there are different nuances to that campaign. I accept that there are activists and spokespeople for the campaign who do not take that approach, but some of the right hon. Gentleman’s leading advocates and spokespeople take that exact approach and have spent two and half years telling 52% of the country that they have betrayed a generation and that they are wrong.

It is with sadness rather than anger that I say that it is not going to work. It will not provide a sustainable future for this country, just as the words of the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) do not provide any comfort or reassurance to the 48% of people, including a number of her own constituents, who voted remain and who feel passionately that the future is being taken away from them and their children.
I want to turn my attention to a no-deal outcome, because it is increasingly likely that that will be the default option as we approach March 2019 and as we prove unable to agree on an alternative course of action.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on the impact that this would have, and I agree with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) as well. The businesses in my constituency that will be most affected by this, by tariffs and problems at borders are, like his, not the big companies—for example, the Heinz factory that employs 1,200 people in my constituency and more in the supply chain—because they have the ability to plan for what comes next and have been doing contingency planning for some time. They have political clout: should there be queues at lorry parks, they will be able to get their products through. The hardest hit will be the smaller companies that have perishable goods and do not have the clout and contingency funds, such as the Kings Quality Foods meat production company in my constituency. I agree with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that many of these very good companies will go under if we do not take action now to prevent a no-deal Brexit.

On the way down here last week, I was stopped at the train station in my Wigan constituency by a mum whose son has a life-limiting illness: Duchenne muscular dystrophy. That young boy, Jack, has become extremely well-known in Wigan. His parents have founded a charity called Joining Jack and have been campaigning for a cure. There is no cure as yet, but there is medication that can delay the degenerative effects of this horrible, cruel illness. She is desperately worried about what is about to happen; like many families around the country, they are discussing stockpiling medicine. Every dose that that young boy misses knocks weeks off his life. Conservative Members on the hard end of Tory Brexit are playing serious, high-stakes poker with people’s lives, and we should be concerned about how to stop it.

I am also concerned about food. Some 30% of our food comes from the EU, and many of my constituents, like those of many other hon. Members, are already accessing food banks because they cannot afford food prices. What do we do when inflation and the price of food goes up as the value of the pound falls?

Like Ciaran, I am concerned about the impact of what we are doing to Ireland and Northern Ireland. It is often called “the Ireland problem”, but as they rightly keep telling us, it is a problem that we created for them. I was serving in the shadow Cabinet in the run-up to the referendum, and I spent months going around the country, mostly in northern towns, trying to convince people that remain was the best option. Apart from the times when we raised it, the issue of Northern Ireland and the border came up only once. Here we are with just days to go until we leave the European Union, and it seems that there is a group of people who think that that is not an issue. Ciaran can tell them that it absolutely is.

There are profound questions to ask about the implications for energy and our pensions. We ought to work together to ensure we have the legal tools available to prevent the outcome of no deal.

Dr Drew: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I was in Northern Ireland a fortnight ago talking to Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs officials, who have to implement whatever they have to implement in March. The reality is that they have nothing to implement. They cannot put a border in, and they cannot do checks because they have not taken on additional staff. They admit it is a mess. They have to make decisions, although they are very wary of making political decisions, because they are not politicians. That is the reality. I was in Newry, and I saw it. The problem is that they do not know what will happen after March.

Lisa Nandy: I could not agree more. As we approach Brexit, far too many people are making false promises or are being far too complacent about the potential impact of what we are going to do. I have spent time talking to our counterparts who are about to bear the brunt of it. They know the cost of it, and we should too.

Still now, given everything we know about what is about to hit us, the Government are refusing to be honest. I say this to the Minister as somebody who indicated from the outset that I was prepared to consider the Government’s withdrawal agreement—I have read every page of it and the seven-page political statement that goes alongside it. They cannot ask Members of Parliament like me, who are prepared to put the country’s interests first, to vote for a withdrawal agreement while withholding information about what its impact will be.

The Minister will not tell us what the economic impact is of the various options available—no deal, this deal or remaining in the EU. That is one of the reasons why I and almost every single Member of Parliament in this Chamber support the amendment to the Finance Bill that would force the Government to reveal that information, which we will vote on later. Why should we have to drag the Government to the House and force them to reveal information that should have been ours by right? The Government have no right to withhold that information from the people and Parliament. We are about to embark on a course of action that could be destructive to this country, so the Government have a duty and a responsibility to put that information before the House.

Tom Brake: Like the hon. Lady, perhaps I can speculate on the reason why the Government are seeking to withhold this information. Is it not simply because they will be extremely embarrassed when it confirms that the Prime Minister’s deal, no deal, Canada plus plus plus, Norway minus minus minus, or whatever else, is worse economically than staying in the European Union? That is why they do not want the information out there.

Lisa Nandy: The difficulty is that we do not know, and we should know. It is our right to know. More importantly, the people we represent have a right to know before we potentially embark on a course of action that could be deeply destructive to their lives in the ways I outlined a moment ago.

The state of this debate is an absolute disgrace. It needs to be reset with honesty and clarity. That begins with the Government setting out their plan B to avoid a no-deal Brexit if, as seems likely, the withdrawal deal does not secure the consent of the House. What legal advice have the Government had about the mechanism to revoke article 50? Without knowing that, we do not even know whether there is a clear route to prevent no
deal at all. What discussions have they had with the EU about extending article 50? Is there a willingness to do so? Do they intend to do so if this deal does not succeed?

The lesson that should have been learned in the past two and a half years is not only that we should have done the referendum differently but that we need a completely different approach to the way we have done politics over the past two and a half years. We have collectively let this country down with the angry shouts of betrayal and the inability to listen to people who do not share our point of view. The only mandate that came out of that very divisive referendum was for compromise. That is what the House of Commons needs to start doing now.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I debated with my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) during the referendum campaign, and we both tried to keep the debate calm and rational. I completely agree that anger, nastiness and calling people names does not help the cause of democracy. Having said that, I disagree completely with her last point. She said that the result of the referendum was for compromise. No, it was not. It was to leave the European Union, and the question was completely unambiguous and unconditional. Since the referendum, the people in the minority—those who lost—have gradually tried to recast the debate, continue with project fear and put barriers in the way so they can start again. I do not think the debate should be between leavers and remainers: it should be between the people who accept the democratic decision and those who do not. The Lib Dems have been quite clear throughout that they do not accept the democratic decision.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, as he has accused us of not being democratic. Will he explain what is undemocratic about allowing the people, in a people’s vote, to determine whether they agree with the deal that the Government have come forward with?

Graham Stringer: The fact is that we had a vote, and it was hard-fought-for. Like many hon. Members on both sides of the House, I had been arguing for a referendum since before I joined Parliament—I was elected in 1997, as was the right hon. Gentleman. Right hon. and hon. Members had been arguing for referendums going back to Maastricht—I voted to have a referendum on Lisbon—and we kept losing. The argument for a referendum was that many of the people’s rights had been given away in treaties such as Amsterdam, Nice, Maastricht, the Single European Act and Lisbon, and they should have had a chance to vote on that.

Peter Grant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Stringer: I have not finished answering this one.

Eventually, a party that agreed that there should be a referendum won a general election. Hon. Members from all parties voted to have a referendum. I accept that in a democracy people can change their minds, but they cannot do so before we have implemented a decision that hundreds of right hon. and hon. Members voted for. That would detract from democracy.

If the result of the referendum is not respected fully and carried out, there will be a fundamental issue for those who support the 1975 innovation of referendums. The Scottish National party, for example, will no doubt come back for another referendum on the future of Scotland; we have also had a referendum on the voting system, and might have another. That will undermine the legitimacy of not only this referendum but others. People who voted leave would not necessarily accept the legitimacy of a second referendum, and not to implement the first one would undermine the whole constitutional construct of referendums. That is the answer to the question of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

At the previous general election, the right hon. Gentleman stood on an election ticket for another referendum and won his seat. I accept that, but only 12 people from his party won on that particular ticket; my party stood on a ticket to honour the referendum result, as did the Conservative party, and that is what I intend to vote for, and will continue to vote for, whether that means voting in support of the Government if they put sensible things forward, or voting against if they do not put sensible things forward—which I think is the position with the agreement.

A great deal has been said today, and I will go through some of the arguments put forward. One was that during the referendum people did not know enough to come to a conclusion and were duped in some way. As in all electorates, people on both sides distort: they get excited and go past the facts. For example, I have never been in a general election in which the Lib Dem literature put out in the constituency has stayed close to the known facts that everyone else in the constituency believes in, but that is not a reason to rerun elections. The same happens at a national level. In a democracy, we leave it to the electorate to use their common sense to judge, from their experience, between nonsense and sense.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a difference between a general election, the result of which may be overturned in three, four or five years—whenever the next election takes place—and a referendum, which potentially has a permanent effect? Does he not agree that the confirmed evidence of illegal activities by Vote Leave and BeLeave—Leave.EU is now being investigated by the National Crime Agency—suggests that this referendum was of a questionable nature? In case he suggests that the remain campaign did the same, I add that no one has taken any allegation about that campaign to court, as has happened to the other side.

Graham Stringer: I am sure, Sir Roger, that if I started to get into matters that may come before the courts, you would rule me out of order. I will not do that. All I would say is that legal action has often been taken over general elections—another case from Kent is before the court at this very moment—so I do not accept that point. After the 1975 referendum, it took more than 40 years to hold another. As I explained in answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s previous intervention, a party needs to win a general election saying, “We want a second referendum”, before we have one—and good luck to them, because I think they would lose.

All parties have a great deal of division. The country is split, and party support is split. Many leave voters vote for my party, and for the Conservative party, so if
the parties chose to move away from their position, they would be in electoral peril—but it is up to the parties to stand for that, if they want to, and to lose the support of people who voted leave.

It is often said—it has been said in this debate—that promises were made by Vote Leave that have not been kept. I campaigned as hard as I could for leave, but I made no promises. How can a Labour MP, in opposition, make such promises? The referendum was not a manifesto that one party was behind; it was an argument about what this country should do—should we be in the European Union, or out? The only decision, as I said at the beginning, was whether to leave or stay in—a decision that the electorate made.

Peter Grant: I am intrigued by the hon. Gentleman’s astonishment at how a Labour MP could possibly make promises to the electorate during a referendum. His colleague next to him, the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), will know what I am talking about. Did the hon. Gentleman read the vow that Gordon Brown put on the front page of Scotland’s biggest national newspaper immediately before the 2014 referendum? That was clearly a case of an Opposition politician—a Labour politician—making promises about what would happen if, in a referendum, people did what he wanted them to do. Why is the hon. Gentleman so astonished about what a Labour politician might do in 2016, when his own party leader did it in 2014?

Graham Stringer: I am not sure that I completely understand the question. One cannot promise to carry out something if one is not in government; one can only make the case for people voting a particular way in a referendum. The electorate voted as they did, and that was clearly an instruction for the Government to carry out. They have not been very good at doing it, but it was an instruction. During the debate that set up the referendum, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who was on Labour’s Front Bench at the time, gave an absolute commitment: “This is not for Members of Parliament to decide. We’re passing the power over to the electorate to decide.” That was echoed by all the parties. One cannot make promises in a referendum campaign; all one can do is advise people which way to vote, which I did. It is a bogus argument to say that promises were made and not carried out.

Martin Whitfield: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a difference between a general election, in which parties stand on manifestos on a broad range of issues, and this referendum, which asked a very specific question? Today, we have a very different level of knowledge of what that specific question means, which was not available when the referendum took place.

Graham Stringer: It was always going to be the case that we would have a different level of knowledge and information afterwards, because time goes on; I agree with my hon. Friend. I put it that what has happened since is that our arguments have been validated by the obstructive nature of the EU. I remember many debates and discussions in which the arguments of the leave campaign were, in essence, that the EU had too much control of our democracy and the majority of our laws.

Peter Grant: It was always going to be the case that promises were made by Vote Leave that have not been kept. I campaigned as hard as I could for leave, but I made no promises. How can a Labour MP, in opposition, make such promises? The referendum was not a manifesto that one party was behind; it was an argument about what this country should do—should we be in the European Union, or out? The only decision, as I said at the beginning, was whether to leave or stay in—a decision that the electorate made.

Graham Stringer: My hon. Friend makes a number of points. On trade unions rights, there is no doubt that in 1988, when the President of the Commission came to the TUC, he said, “Forget Thatcher; we can look after the trade unions.” Unfortunately, we moved from a social Europe to a global, much more free-market Europe. Since then—I do not know if my hon. Friend knows—the Viking and Laval decisions have undermined minimum wage legislation throughout Europe, and have damaged trade unions because they have changed the definition of a trade dispute. I do not accept that the EU is fundamentally good for trade unions, but I must move on.

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

I was not going to talk about Northern Ireland, because there are people in this room who know a great deal more about it than I do, but I do not think there is anyone else here who was present—the Minister could have been, but I am pretty certain that no one else was—when Croatia was accepted into the European Union. There were about three or four of us in the Chamber—there clearly was not as much concern about the EU then. Croatia has one of the EU’s longest borders with the rest of Europe. Across that border there is human trafficking and sex trafficking; it is unguarded a lot of the time and it is one of the main entry points of wickedness into the EU. Croatia was accepted by the EU, but it did not have the rule of law, and it protected war criminals after the break-up of Yugoslavia. The EU wanted Croatia in, because it was expanding.

Northern Ireland has had a troubled border. The EU had nothing to do with the Good Friday agreement. The basis of the Good Friday agreement is that all parties accept peace. The EU has been weaponising that
issue; the United Kingdom Government have said very clearly that they will not produce a hard border, so the only people who might are those in the EU. They have used that as a control over the UK, which unfortunately the Prime Minister has accepted.

This is a huge debate, as I am sure you know, Mr Hollobone. The continued project fear accepts that somehow the EU has been great for the United Kingdom’s growth, and that the EU’s regulatory model is economically a good thing, but for the 10 years before the referendum, all other continents apart from Antarctica grew by considerably more than the EU—it was not a particularly vital area. There are some areas where this country is strong, such as in the biological and agricultural sciences, where we are world leaders, but the regulations coming from the EU damage our economy and cause job losses regularly. I do not believe in a completely free market—quite the reverse—but we can have regulations that are appropriate to our economy, and that will help us to create jobs at the cutting edge. The only future for this country is in high technology, which is restricted by the EU.

Although there are many more points I could make, I will finish by talking about no deal. It would be better if we had a deal. It is extraordinary, when our regulatory position is completely aligned with the EU, that the EU tries to keep control of this country’s laws. It is even more extraordinary that the Prime Minister has accepted that. The majority of our trade is on World Trade Organisation rules. The EU is a signatory to the World Trade Organisation. There is no reason whatever why the disruption if we left the EU without a deal would not be minimal. Are people here who support the EU saying that if we left without a deal, the EU would stop sending medicines to this country? If they are saying that, why would we want to be part of a body that would punish the child with muscular dystrophy that my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan talked about? It would not happen by accident; the EU would have to go back to the EU to seek that ongoing co-operation to prevent that from arising. I have asked the Secretary of State for Health what it involves, there is no longer a coherent argument.

Lisa Nandy: We rely on our Government being prepared to go back to the EU to seek that ongoing co-operation to prevent that from arising. I have asked the Government to provide clarity on that. It cannot be right that we are asked to back something without absolutely no idea where it may lead and what the alternatives are.

Graham Stringer: I do not think the right hon. Gentleman was listening to what I was saying. We are completely aligned with the EU, both on our medical regulations and on our trade regulations. There would be no need, on day one, to stop those medicines coming across.

A deal would be better—a sensible deal, not the deal put forward, which gives the EU suzerainty over this country for an indefinite time. I will probably be in the same Lobby as my hon. Friends when it comes to voting on this deal—if it ever goes to the Floor of the House. I have voted with the Government and against them, and I will continue to look at whether they are implementing the deal. The Prime Minister said originally that no deal can be better than a bad deal. Unfortunately, she has come back with a bad deal.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 7.30 pm. We now come to the Front-Bench speeches, after which Liz Twist will sum up the debate. The first Front-Bench spokesman is Peter Grant for the Scottish National party.

6.10 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to be able to begin the summing-up speeches, but I am in two minds because a little birdie told me that the Division bell may go at around half-past 6. I wonder whether we should try to get through the debate by then, rather than having a hiatus of perhaps an hour and a half and coming back for the last few minutes.

The events of the past week or so have made this debate even more topical. By far the most significant thing to happen in the past week has been the Prime Minister not once but twice, going on the record and saying, “We can stop Brexit.” She no longer talks about there being two options—her deal or no deal. She now talks openly about the possibility that Brexit may not happen.

Interestingly, in her lengthy contribution, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) never actually said we cannot stop Brexit. She attempted—not very successfully, in my humble opinion—to explain why we should not stop it, but she never tried to say we cannot stop it. I invite the Minister to tell us, right at the beginning of his response, whether he agrees with the Prime Minister that Brexit can still be stopped. Once the Government conceded that point, the debate would become very different. I still believe that we can stop Brexit, if that is the will of Parliament and the will of the people. How do we know what the will of the people is without asking them? That is a question that some people may want to answer.

I believe the Government tried not to have to present a coherent argument that we should not stop Brexit because, once all the facts have become known and people, I suspect including a lot of MPs, realise just what it involves, there is no longer a coherent argument. The recently departed Brexit Secretary admitted that he did not realise how important trade between Dover and Calais was to the UK economy. If the person who led negotiations on the UK’s behalf did not fully understand what Brexit was about, what chance did the 34 million other people who took part in the referendum have of understanding all the intricacies and details?

I could almost understand the rationale for saying, “Well, maybe it’s a bad idea and maybe a disastrous idea, but we have to go through with it anyway because
it’s what people voted for.” The truth is that none of us has the right to say what those 17.5 million people voted for. We know they voted to leave the European Union. I think it was the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake)—it may have been someone else in his party—who said immediately, “Now we know where people voted to go away from, but we’ve no idea what they voted to move towards.” We can guess that not many of those people voted deliberately to make themselves, their families, their towns and their communities poorer.

We do know that those people voted for some kind of Brexit in a referendum that, by today’s standards, would not get a clean bill of health as free and fair. The leave campaign, in its various guises, stands accused on a number of counts of breaching spending limits that are there to stop the wealthy elite from buying our democracy. We know there were large-scale breaches of data protection law. We know that the leave campaign lied to us. How else can we describe the £350 million on the side of the big red bus?

Graham Stringer: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, when we include the leaflets arguing the case for remain that the Government sent out, the remain campaign effectively spent twice as much? Those leaflets cost £7 million, doubling the amount spent on the remain campaign.

Peter Grant: It is a matter of record how much the UK Government spent. It is not yet a matter of record how much the leave campaign spent, and I doubt whether it will ever be a matter of record where exactly in the world that money came from. Some of it was deliberately channelled through Northern Ireland to ensure that its original source could never be made known. Interestingly, those who are so desperate to have no regulatory divergence between Northern Ireland and mainland Britain are quite happy to have regulatory divergence when it stops the source of that half a million pound donation ever being made public.

The Brexiteers tell us—the hon. Gentleman tried to—that none of this really matters. They tell us that, somehow, if someone cheats at the Olympics and gets caught, they have to hand back their medal and lose their world record 10, 15 or 20 years later; if someone cheats at football, they are banned from the competition the next year; but if someone cheats with the very fundamentals of our democracy, “Well, that’s just what politicians do.” If that is the view of the Brexit side in this argument, it is no wonder that, as the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood mentioned, politicians are held in such low regard by the citizens of these islands. If politicians themselves are prepared to stand up and say, “Oh, yeah, somebody cheated, but it doesn’t matter because it’s only politics”—

Lisa Nandy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: Happily.

Lisa Nandy: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is indicative of the poor quality of that side of the argument that the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) refused to take a single intervention or to engage with any of the arguments, but is currently on Twitter calling me a betrayer of this country because I made the point that we had to calm the debate down? /Interuption./ Oh, now she seems to have found her voice. Perhaps she should have found it earlier when we were debating the actual issue facing this country.

Peter Grant: I agree wholeheartedly with a lot of the comments the hon. Lady made about the language of the debate—

Andrea Jenkyns: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone.

Lisa Nandy: She speaks!

Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you for being lovely. I have never made a point of order before. I did not take any interventions because I did not think it was right to intervene on anybody else. To be honest, Lisa, I was not calling you a betrayer; I was actually pointing to the fact, on social media, that it is fine you likening people to the far right, which is disgusting—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that is not a point of order, and the hon. Lady must not address another Member directly across the Chamber. If she wants to think about how to phrase her point of order, I am very happy to take it. Alternatively, she can intervene on the Member who has the floor. I call Peter Grant.

Peter Grant: I have to take the word of the hon. Member for Wigan about what her counterpart has put on Twitter, because the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood blocks me from viewing her tweets. I do not know why. Is that what the standard of debate has come to—getting blocked by a fellow MP on Twitter just for saying some things they do not agree with?

The hon. Member for Wigan made the point powerfully that the whole Brexit process has worsened what was already an extremely worrying position in British politics. Too many people have lost the ability to disagree without becoming disagreeable. Too many people have lost the ability forcefully and passionately to present a case in disagreement with somebody without resorting to personal insult and abuse. Yes, there are people who would claim to be on my side of the Scottish argument who resort to the same tactics. I will call them out just as quickly as I will call out others.

It is one of the many ironies of this situation that the people on whose behalf appalling abuse was heaped on a small number of Conservative Back Benchers for rebelling on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill to help to secure a majority in favour of Parliament being given a vote on the final deal, and in some cases the people who participated in that abuse, would be furious if they were denied the right to vote on a deal that they are not happy about. I believe there is an unanswerable case for asking the people again, this time with an electorate who know exactly what they are being asked to vote on and in a referendum that can be made fair in all regards.

Catherine West: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if there is a further vote, on this question or any other, we should get to the bottom of the National Crime
Agency inquiry, clean up not just the funding but some of the messaging that came out, and learn the lessons from that?

Peter Grant: There is no doubt at all that the law in these islands has not kept up with modern campaigning techniques—particularly social media campaigning. There is a legitimate, right and lawful way to use social media to press a political campaign, and there are other ways, which certainly are not moral and should not be legal. We have not yet got the law in the right place for that. In any election, if there are valid and significant questions afterwards as to whether it was fair, the result is tainted for everybody.

For example, we now know there was a dodgy decision-making process about where the World Cup would be held in a few years’ time, which tainted that decision immediately. If people are prepared to demand a re-run of a vote about where the World Cup would be held, because they think the decision might be a bit dodgy, how much more important is it to at least look at and satisfy ourselves as to whether one of the most important decisions that people in these islands will ever be asked to take was taken fairly, or whether there was serious or criminal misconduct and whether that seriously undermined the legitimacy of the decision.

Martin Whitfield: The hon. Gentleman is making a good point about the use of social media. I point out, with some disappointment, that there are Members in this Chamber who are tweeting about the competence and views of other Members in this Chamber. Is it not the case that, if we are going to improve the quality of debate and the confidence that members of the public have in us as their representatives, we need to be respectful of the debate, as well as the mentions and motions that are made in the House?

Peter Grant: I will defend the right of anybody, whether they are a politician or a normal person, to take exception to somebody’s political views and to knock down their views as hard as they can if need be. However, when they begin to knock or mock the person, a line has been crossed. Obviously, I cannot monitor what is happening on Twitter just now and some people have made sure that I cannot monitor what they are doing publicly on Twitter.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: No, I really need to move on. I said that I did not want to take up too much time and I may have taken more interventions than I expected.

We hear a lot about sovereignty when we talk about Brexit. Regarding sovereignty in Scotland, it might be taken more interventions than I expected. However, when they begin to knock or mock the person, a line has been crossed. Obviously, I cannot monitor what is happening on Twitter just now and some people have made sure that I cannot monitor what they are doing publicly on Twitter.

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that we do not leave, we have got to be prepared to go back to the people and say, “Now that you know exactly what this Brexit thing really means, do you still want to go ahead with it? Do you want the Government to try and get a better deal, or do you now think that we should not be going ahead with Brexit at all?”

I am absolutely convinced that there will be a people’s vote in Scotland in the not too distant future. The Prime Minister, and indeed the rest of Parliament, may well have a significant part to play in deciding whether people’s vote is conducted among 5.5 million people on one question or 60 million people on a different question. The intransigent and patronising approach to Brexit that the UK Government have been adopting is effectively persuading greatly increasing numbers of people in Scotland that when we exercise our unalienable right to choose the form of government best suited to our needs, fewer and fewer people in Scotland are prepared to believe that that will be based in the city of London for much longer.

**Tom Brake:** On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. I seek your guidance on whether it is appropriate for Members who have taken part in this debate to tweet during it and to use the word “betrayal”. Would you agree, Mr Hollobone, that using that word in such a heated discussion is something that Members should know to avoid? We are trying to work in a reasoned and safe manner, as far as possible. The use of the word “betrayal” potentially has risks associated with it.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** I refer Members to Mr Speaker’s quick guide to participating in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, in which he states that a Member should not insult another Member or accuse them of lying. Whether “betrayal” is an insult or not is probably subjective. Mr Brake has made his point and it is on the record.

6.27 pm

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, as it was to listen to much of it with Sir Roger in the Chair.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for the way in which she introduced the debate and framed the discussion. I join her in congratulating Ciaran O’Doherty, who initiated the petition. Whatever else we think, I am sure we all celebrate the fact that a young man, 15 years old, wanted to participate in the discussion that is going on across our country and raise the concerns from his part of it.

I understand those concerns. I spent a fair amount of time in Northern Ireland in the summer and I have to admit that it was the first time I had been there for 40 years, when, at the height of the conflict, I organised students across the sectarian divide and it was a part of the country at war, with the war spilling over into the rest of the country, and I was struck by how far things have changed, but also by how fragile the peace is and how much the need to address the issues of the border must be a central part of these negotiations.

I sympathise with Ciaran’s frustration, and the frustration felt by the signatories to the petition, about the way the negotiations have been proceeding and the risks for us as a country. The hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who was formerly the Transport Minister, and was also the Universities Minister, was right when he said recently that we are facing the biggest crisis since the second world war. My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) made that point in a different way and reflected on a different aspect of the crisis: the way the binary and angry discourse on the issue opened up by a binary and angry referendum made it difficult for us to navigate the choices ahead of us. We have to be honest. As she said, we do not want simplistic arguments on either side. There is no easy way forward from the position we are now in as a country.

This is one of the most significant moments in recent British history. One of the things about history is it does not feel historic when people are in the middle of it. They are living their lives in an ordinary way, alongside making the decisions. However, the decisions that we make in the next few weeks will shape our country for generations. It is a heavy responsibility on us, and it is one on which the Government have been failing. We have seen two years of internal conflict for the Government, and external chaos, until, last Thursday, they finally brought us a draft withdrawal agreement that, predictably, unleashed another wave of ministerial resignations. However, perhaps even more extraordinarily, within 24 hours of signing up to it, five members of the Cabinet were openly plotting against it. It is a deal that, on the basis of last Thursday’s statement, cannot command the support of Parliament, so the situation could not be more serious.

It did not have to be this way. If the Prime Minister had reached out at the outset after the referendum and said, with honesty, not some of the nonsense that was said about the nature of the vote—that it was a historic mandate and the biggest vote ever, and so on—but that the people had voted to leave the European Union only by the closest of margins, that it was a mandate for an orderly withdrawal but not an opportunity to burn every remnant of 45 years of co-operation and partnership, and that we would seek a closer relationship that was right for the economy, no longer as members but as partners, putting the livelihoods of people in this country first in a customs union close to the single market and in the agencies and partnerships we have built together for 45 years, she could have secured a majority in this House and united the country that was so bitterly divided by the referendum. With that sort of deal the Northern Ireland border would not have been an issue.

Instead, the Prime Minister pandered to the Brexit extremists of the European Research Group in her party—people like the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) who said his ambition was to destroy the European Union.

**Andrea Jenkyns:** On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. Earlier, there was talk about respect for people. Is it acceptable for a shadow Minister to call people extremists?

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** The hon. Lady has made a point of order, whereas I think she probably wanted to intervene on the shadow Minister, so I shall ask her to take that as an intervention and invite him to respond.
Paul Blomfield: I am happy to do that. I do think that those who have defined their politics by their desire to take us out of the European Union at whatever cost to the economy of our country and the stability of our continent are taking an extreme position. I think we need a more sophisticated debate and the word “extreme” is a reasonable one within the vocabulary of our language.

I just wish that the Prime Minister had set out at the beginning of the process a negotiation agenda that would have brought people together, instead of drawing red lines in the interests of party management rather than the country; then we would be in a different position. The schism that has divided the Conservative party has blocked effective negotiations at every turn. What has been happening would be almost forgivable if it was based simply on ideology, but now it is as much about personal ambition in the Tory party. Obviously everyone acknowledges the brazen ambition of the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), which determined everything he said on Brexit, but now others are reinventing themselves with a clear eye to the pending leadership election they want to prompt.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) said, Opposition MPs could stand back and enjoy it while the Conservative party tears itself apart, but it is too important, because the future of our country is being sacrificed on the altar of Conservative battles and personal ambition. Parliament must not let that happen. The Prime Minister has finally managed to secure a majority in this House—against the deal she presented to us last week. It fails the Opposition’s six tests, which—I see the Minister smiling—she at one stage embraced and said she was “determined to meet”. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) set out with some clarity the way the deal fails the tests, and fails the country. Those who voted leave, and there is no significant indication that views have shifted dramatically, as my hon. Friend pointed out, will not ultimately thank politicians who deliver a damaging Brexit on a false prospectus.

The question now is what happens not if, but probably when, the House rejects the deal. The petition reflects the frustration that people feel about the shambolic situation, when the House rejects the deal. The petition reflects deliver a damaging Brexit on a false prospectus.

Pointed out, will not ultimately thank politicians who have been parroting that for years putting the interests of their party before the interests of the country, pursuing a divisive split from the EU rather than seeking to build a new and close relationship, and negotiating within their warring party rather than negotiating effectively with the European Union. They have failed the country. Our people need to ensure that they get it.

Tom Brake: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for enabling me to correct the record. He will know, of course, that we promised an in-out referendum in relation to any treaty change. The referendum that we had was not about treaty change, but about whether we should be in the European Union or not.

Paul Blomfield: I hate to correct the right hon. Gentleman, but he is wrong. I will send him a copy of his party’s own leaflet, which criticised the Government for offering only a conditional referendum, criticised Labour for not offering one at all and said there should be an in-out referendum and the result should be binding. He should take care, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan pointed out that we should all take care, when reflecting on these issues.

It has been informative to watch as the “No deal is better than a bad deal” mantra has finally been dropped by almost everybody on the Conservative Benches. We have watched people who have been parroting that for quite some time rush into the TV studios over the weekend, seeking to secure support for the Prime Minister’s deal by saying, of course rightly, that no deal would be a disaster for the country.

Peter Grant: Does the hon. Gentleman not think that it is slightly strange that the Prime Minister tries to frighten remainers by saying, “If you vote down the deal, we will leave without a deal,” while at the same time she tries to fight off the ERG by saying, “If you vote down the deal, we don’t leave at all.”?

Paul Blomfield: I do; it is a reflection of the corner into which the Prime Minister has painted herself.

Petitioners should be reassured that we, as Opposition parties, will work across the House to ensure that we do not face a no-deal scenario. When the deal is inevitably voted down, the Prime Minister must follow the direction of the House. She has been intent on denying Parliament a truly meaningful vote, just as we have been intent on securing it. We will not accept the premise that she is trying to present —“It is my deal or no deal, take it or leave it, like it or lump it”—and nor will Parliament. When the deal is voted down, we need maximum flexibility and all options on the table.

We will demand a general election, as hon. Members would expect, and I hope that some Conservative MPs, although perhaps understandably reluctant to vote for one after their last outing, may come to realise that it would be in the interest of the country to break the deadlock. If they do not, then all other options must be kept open, including a public vote that would include remain as an option on the ballot paper.

The Government have spent the last two and a half years putting the interests of their party before the interests of the country, pursuing a divisive split from the EU rather than seeking to build a new and close relationship, and negotiating within their warring party rather than negotiating effectively with the European Union. They have failed the country. Our people need and deserve better, and this Parliament will need to ensure that they get it.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris): This is the first time I have served under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. You are a near neighbour of mine in constituency terms and used to represent a huge chunk of my constituency. I know I do not do as good a job as a constituency Member of Parliament as you did, but I hope I can at least do good and behave myself in front of you as Chairman of this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as it was to serve under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale).

I have learned many things during this debate. The first thing is never to drink a litre of water over a three-hour debate, but that is by the bye. I learned the power of a petition, because we have had a good and on the whole, constructive debate. I commend Ciara O’Doherty, the lead petitioner, because it is a big step to do this sort of thing, and to get the publicity that has gone with it. He should be congratulated in many areas, because without any mass of publicity, his petition has breached the 100,000 mark. Sky is trying to get a petition about leaders’ debates—a petition that I am in favour of—which it advertises on a regular basis on its news broadcasts, and which now sits at 70,000-odd signatures, so Ciara O’Doherty should be very much congratulated on getting the number of names on his petition that he did.

I also congratulate the Petitions Committee on arranging this debate, and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on sponsoring it. I have enjoyed listening to many of the contributions, and I thank the hon. Lady especially for the polite and sensitive way in which she introduced the debate. I will talk about many of the questions she raised, especially around no deal, which other people call “leaving the EU on WTO terms”, and one of my colleagues calls a “global British leave.”

I should state at the beginning that no one is talking about introducing a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We will not do so, and the Irish Taoiseach has said again today that Ireland will not. That is not on the table. I will pick up the points that the hon. Lady very properly mentioned about the concerns of EU citizens in the event of us leaving on WTO terms. As the Prime Minister said, these people are our friends, neighbours and co-workers, and “EU citizens living lawfully in the UK today” will be entitled, and welcome, to stay.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) for her contribution. As ever, she hid her views under a bushel; I wish she would just tell people where she stands on issues. As ever, she strongly represents the people who voted for her in her constituency when she won it at the general election, and her constituents’ views on these matters. Her point about trust in politics, a fair point that was echoed by a number of other speakers, was particularly well made.

I listened to what the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) had to say about EU citizens’ rights. There is a careful balance to be struck here, because there have been a wealth of assurances from senior politicians, I think on both sides of the House, that EU citizens currently resident and working in the United Kingdom would be welcome to stay here under a no deal, and the Prime Minister has already pledged that under a deal. I think the hon. Lady may have been slightly confused, if I may be so bold, as to the bit of the withdrawal agreement that she read out; that was an inner deal, a reciprocal way that both we and the European Union will deal with EU citizens living in the United Kingdom and UK citizens living in the EU. I will happily write to her, or have a chat with her afterwards, to clarify that.

Tulip Siddiq: Does the Minister think it is the right way forward—even if, as I understand it, this is the agreement that we have reached—that if someone has been out of the country for five years for any reason, their status is not settled?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think the hon. Lady will find that that is common in international law across the globe, so yes, I think it is correct. I can only hold in admiration Sarit, the hon. Lady’s medic constituent, who does 2000 surgeries every year, thank him for what he does, and say, “You are more than welcome to stay. We welcome you with open arms. Thank you for being here in the first place.” I wish Georgia well in finding a job. I hope I have made the point about how we will deal with EU citizens.

It is always a pleasure to listen to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) talk. He will remember a day in the last general election, at the beginning of the campaign, when he and I were canvassing on the same street in his constituency—a constituency I know well, as I lived in the neighbouring one for a decent period of time. He is a very good champion of his area, but he is completely out of sync with his constituents on this particular matter, since it is a 56% leave seat, and the area we were canvassing might well have a different view from him on this point.

Tom Brake: I note with satisfaction that the hon. Gentleman’s visit to Carshalton and Wallington did not deliver the result that he and the Conservative party had hoped for. I point out to him that the latest polling suggests that my constituency would now vote to remain if another vote took place, and he may also be aware that in every single constituency in the country, a majority of people are apparently in favour of a people’s vote.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Ah, polling. My word; thank God the polls are always correct, eh? I wonder how well the hon. Gentleman would fare if, based on this issue, there were a people’s vote about who should be the Member of Parliament in his constituency. I am not convinced that a people’s vote is the way forward, but he did identify, quite correctly, a dilemma that many Labour Members of Parliament will recognise, especially those representing midlands and northern seats. They passionately believe that leaving the European Union is not the right thing for the country to do, but represent seats in which the vast majority of people think otherwise.

I always enjoy listening to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who I think is one of the best orators in the House—he tells the story. He might have been slightly confused, if I may be so bold, as to the bit of the withdrawal agreement that he read out—but we will not go there quite yet—but did so in a completely different way to the problem tweet that we inadvertently talked about during the debate. He represents his
constituents fairly; as a believer in this being the right thing for our country, I do the same for mine. I met representatives of the timber trade recently to discuss their concerns about deal and no-deal issues.

Forgive me for choosing favourites, but my favourite speech was that of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy).

Lisa Nandy: Oh God.

Chris Heaton-Harris: You can stick that on your leaflet at the next election. Forgive my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) for that tweet. You have not betrayed the people; quite the opposite—in your speech you represented people’s views faithfully, passionately and with an understanding of the dilemma that some Members face.

Andrea Jenkyns: I would prefer for the Minister not to quote my tweet without having read it, so I will read it to the Chamber:

“Ultimate Brexit fence sitter Labour’s Lisa Nandy has likened those using the word ‘Betrayal’”—

I am quoting her words—

“to the Far-Right. Rubbish! What about Gina Miller who likened Brexiteers to extremists. Both Conservative and Labour stood on a manifesto to deliver Brexit. Not to do so is a betrayal.”

I did not say that she had betrayed the people. Would you please retract that, Minister?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before the Minister responds, I remind him and the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) not to refer to other Members directly. All Members must address the House through the Chair.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I apologise if I inadvertently referred to another Member incorrectly; I was talking about the contribution of the hon. Member for Wigan. I hope I did not upset my hon. Friend. The Member for Morley and Outwood; I did not mean to. I wanted to point out that the hon. Member for Wigan made the case for her constituents’ views. She said—quite rightly in my experience; my constituency is similar—that views have hardened among those who voted to leave the European Union two years ago, and she also talked about how she campaigned in the referendum, so I did not see betrayal in that at all. She also made some wise comments on democracy. We had the largest democratic turnout in our entire history for the referendum, with 33.5 million voters. To my mind, when a decision of such constitutional significance is made, it is paramount that the correct procedure be followed. The ballot paper presented us with a clearcut choice, and a very simple question:

“Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union, or leave the European Union?”

The hon. Lady will probably remember “pencilgate”. During the referendum, people on all sides of the debate were passionate about the way they were going to vote, and people on the leave side were worried that using the voting-booth pencils would result in some Government authority rubbing out their vote. It did not; leave won, and the Government are delivering Brexit.

Lisa Nandy: I am very grateful to the Minister for his kind words, and in particular for striking a better tone than his colleague, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). As well as making the points that he mentioned, I also asked him what the Government’s plan B would be to avoid a no-deal Brexit if the current deal were not passed by the House of Commons. I would be grateful if he responded to that in the remaining time.

Chris Heaton-Harris: One of the points that the hon. Lady raised was about the analysis that would be presented to Parliament when the debate on the withdrawal agreement and political declaration motion takes place. Once we bring forward the vote on the final deal, Her Majesty’s Government will present Parliament with appropriate analysis to make an informed decision. Ahead of an EU Council, it would not be practical or sensible to set out the details of exactly how Her Majesty’s Government would analyse the final deal, but we will set out the assumptions and the methodology when we present the analysis to Parliament for the meaningful vote. We are conducting a comprehensive, thorough and ongoing set of analyses, so I hope that in the near future the hon. Lady will see some of the facts and figures that she wishes to see.

Tom Brake: The Minister may want to correct the record. He might think that I am being a bit pedantic, but he said that the turnout at the referendum was the highest ever. It was indeed 72.2%, but in 1992, the turnout was 72.3%.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I do think the right hon. Gentleman is being a bit pedantic.

As ever, I thank the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) for his wise counsel and his contribution, which outlined many of the issues mentioned by the hon. Member for Wigan. I am also grateful for the Front-Bench speeches from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

The UK and EU have taken quite a decisive step forward since the petition was launched. We have agreed, in principle, the terms of the UK’s smooth and orderly exit from the European Union, as set out in the withdrawal agreement. We have also agreed the broad terms of our future relationship, as set out in the political declaration.

It is worth reiterating what the agreement means, in relation to both the withdrawal agreement and our future relationship with the European Union. It means a whole host of things and answers many of the questions that many Members across the political divide have raised over the past two years. It secures the rights of more than 3 million EU citizens living in the United Kingdom, and about 1 million UK nationals living in the European Union, to continue living in those countries. It guarantees the terms of a time-limited implementation period, which provides the certainty to UK businesses that they have been telling us—as everyone in this Chamber has told us—that they need. It ensures a financial settlement that the Government believe to be fair. It confirms Gibraltar’s inclusion in the withdrawal agreement, including in the implementation period.

A mechanism to resolve any disputes between the UK and the EU in future has been agreed. Crucially, the agreement preserves the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom, upholding the Belfast agreement. A lot has been achieved by the Government
and the Prime Minister in the past weeks and months, whether people have enjoyed the headlines of the past few days or not.

On the future relationship, the draft political declaration means that we have also agreed in principle with the European Union on a free trade area for goods with zero tariffs, on no quotas, and on deep regulatory and customs co-operation, which will protect British businesses and the companies that support people’s jobs and livelihoods—companies such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Wigan. Common ground has been reached on our intention to have a close relationship on services and investment, including financial services; on the desire for wide-ranging sectoral co-operation, including on transport and energy; and on fisheries, recognising that the UK will be an independent coastal state.

Consensus has also been reached on key elements of the future internal security partnership. There will be swift and effective extradition arrangements, and we will continue data exchange on fingerprints, DNA and vehicle records, as well as passenger name records—a whole host of things that not only the Opposition but the Scottish National party have asked for in the past. On foreign, security and defence policy, we have agreed arrangements for consultation and co-operation on sanctions, participation in missions and operations, defence capability development and intelligence exchanges.

While the legal agreements that will establish the future relationship can be negotiated only once the UK is a third country—when we have left the European Union—the full political declaration will provide a precise set of instructions to negotiators. The withdrawal agreement includes a legally binding commitment that ensures that both sides will use their best endeavours to negotiate in good faith the detailed arrangements that will give effect to the future relationship.

As we have always said, Parliament will have the opportunity to vote on the deal reached with the European Union once the full political declaration has been agreed, which will hopefully happen very soon at the summit. Once Parliament has approved the final deal, we will introduce the EU withdrawal agreement Bill. That will implement in UK law our international commitments, as set out in the withdrawal agreement, including on issues rightly raised by Opposition Members such as citizens’ rights, the financial settlement and the time-limited implementation period. It will simply be about domestically implementing commitments agreed in the withdrawal agreement as we bridge to our future relationship.

Those of us who have spent any time in the European Parliament—I spent 10 years there as an MEP; I know that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is an expert on negotiations at the European level—know that nobody will ever get everything that they want from a negotiation. However, there is a deal on the table that is worth looking at seriously. I gently challenge the hon. Gentleman to say whether he actually believes that the Prime Minister said she was determined to meet, they are a reasonable basis for assessing the deal.

Paul Blomfield: I would thank the Minister for allowing me to intervene, but he invited me to do so. I simply respond by asking whether he agrees that, as our six tests were ones that the Prime Minister said she was determined to meet, they are a reasonable basis for assessing the deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I do, and I believe that the Prime Minister believes that she has not only very firmly hit those six tests on the head, but has planted that nail well into the plank of wood. The question is whether Labour’s is a political choice to try to get a general election, or whether it is interested in delivering the best deal in the national interest.

However, that is a bit too political for the tone I was trying to strike. I will make some points on our contingency planning in case the deal does not work out. While the chances of no deal have been reduced considerably, the Government will always do the responsible thing and prepare for all eventualities in case a final agreement cannot be reached. Extensive work to prepare for no deal has been under way for more than two years, and we are taking the necessary steps to ensure that the country continues to operate smoothly from the day we leave.

Our objective in such a scenario would be to minimise disruption by taking unilateral action to prioritise continuity and stability, wherever possible and appropriate to do so. We recognise that, in a no-deal scenario, citizens and businesses would need time to prepare themselves. We published 106 specific technical notices across the summer to help businesses, citizens and consumers do exactly that. We have already passed laws to ensure that we are ready for such a scenario, such as the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018 and the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. We have also signed a number of critical international agreements. On nuclear co-operation, we have signed agreements with the US, Australia and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Every Government Department has been working for nearly two years to prepare for a no-deal scenario, with a huge amount of taxpayers’ money having been spent on this insurance policy. However, there are a number of concerns about how to mitigate some of the potential problems at our borders. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington has disappeared; how annoying. I wanted to point out that he was probably the only person in the room who listened to the Senate debate in the French Assembly about what our French partners are doing to prepare for a no-deal scenario. It is actually quite important that we do the same as them. They have given Ministers emergency powers to ensure the flow of trade across the short straits by increasing the number of border officers and border checkpoints, introducing a border inspection point for agri-goods and a whole host of other things. We must obviously take this in the round.

Going back to the petition, I am afraid that I will disappoint the petitioner and the hon. Member for Blaydon, but I do not think that either will be surprised. Britain will leave the European Union on 29 March next year. The people of the United Kingdom voted to take control of our laws, our money and our borders. The Government—all of us—a clear instruction: they want to leave the European Union. The Government respect that decision.
Liz Twist: I will keep my remarks brief. We have had a wide-ranging, interesting and lively discussion on the broad subject of leaving the European Union. I will return to the points made by our petitioner, Ciaran O’Doherty.

I remind hon. Members that Ciaran and the 110,000 people who signed the petition were saying that they are really concerned about the impact of leaving the European Union without a deal on businesses, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and European citizens. I thank the Minister for his reply, but I am sure that Ciaran will be disappointed that the Minister has not been able to go further towards recognising his very real concerns, and those of all the other petitioners, arising from leaving the European Union.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. I think it has been a thoughtful, interesting and wide-ranging discussion. I hope that the petitioner and people who see the debate appreciate the time given to it, and the contributions from hon. Members. The petitioners will clearly be disappointed, but at least the issues raised by their petition have had a good airing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.
That this House has considered the e-petition relating to leaving the European Union.

7.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 November 2018

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

Road Safety and the Legal Framework

9.30 am

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety and the legal framework.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this important debate on road justice and the legal framework from the perspective of vulnerable road users, which follows two debates on road safety held in this House over the past few weeks. The first was led by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and the second was a Government debate led by the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman).

Those important debates highlighted a range of issues that lead to avoidable road death and serious injury, particularly to vulnerable road users, such as those on foot or riding pedal cycles, but also to motorists, wheelchair users, horse riders and others. As well as raising concerns about issues such as investment in highways, road design, training and The Highway Code, Members present at both debates expressed concerns about gaps in the application of road traffic offences and penalties, highlighted by the experiences brought to them by constituents following deaths and serious injuries among vulnerable road users.

I thank Brake, RoadPeace, Cycling UK and the House of Commons Library for helping me to prepare for this debate by providing detailed briefings. I secured this debate jointly with the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). We are both officers of the all-party parliamentary group on cycling, which last year held an inquiry entitled “Cycling and the Justice System”, culminating in a report that was published in May 2017. That report made 14 recommendations, but today we will focus on just four areas of road justice that we contend need review by Government: clarity over the distinction in charging and sentencing between dangerous and careless driving; misuse of the exceptional hardship rule in respect of driving bans; inadequate sentences for leaving the scene of an accident; and car-dooring.

All of those who are involved have no doubt that there is a need for a review. The wider context is that we and the Government share an ambition to make walking and cycling the natural choice for shorter journeys to reduce congestion, cut pollution, improve health, rejuvenate our shopping parades and save us all money. We also need to cut the cost of the effects of death and serious injury, including through lost futures and exorbitant health costs. Part of the solution is to address gaps in our road traffic laws.

The laws and their prosecution should be there to encourage safer driving, reduce casualties, improve road safety through the deterrent effect, and reduce irresponsible behaviour on our roads. The effectiveness of road traffic laws is of particular importance to vulnerable road users because irresponsible driving presents a disproportionate threat to them. It also puts people off travelling by foot or by bike, despite the huge health and environmental benefits of doing so. We generally expect high safety standards and strong obligations to avoid or minimise hazards in other risky professions, such as rail drivers and airline pilots, and other dangerous workplaces, such as construction sites. However, for drivers of vehicles, lapses of concentration that cause death or injury are regularly dismissed as accidents or carelessness, rather than something that is avoidable.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an extremely good speech in a very good debate, but will she bear it in mind that many employees in this country are put in a dangerous and vulnerable position because their employers force them to work untrained? I am thinking of Deliveroo, and those delivery people who get on a motorcycle or bicycle with no training and are put in a very vulnerable position. We have all seen it and we know that the accident rate is increasing. Employers are putting untrained people in a vulnerable position.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are strong standards in certain industries, such as for those who drive coaches and buses, and I agree that there should be a similar standard in that area. That is the only way to ensure that employers are not forcing their employees or contractors to drive too fast in order to get the job done.

We cannot afford to be relaxed about road deaths and serious injuries. The UK’s road death rate is relatively low, but sadly it is levelling off rather than continuing to decline. The legal framework and our justice system need to send the message that road crime is a real crime, and that it is unacceptable to endanger other road users. When I learned to drive 40 years ago, my teacher told me “Always expect the unexpected,” because even if it is the fault of the dog or the child who runs out between the cars in front of the driver, ultimately it is the driver who will be responsible for their death. My teacher taught me to always drive with that in mind, whatever the driving conditions. That does not always mean driving at 20 mph; it is about appropriateness and safety within the conditions of the road, and always expecting the unexpected.

As I say, the legal framework and our justice system need to send the message that road crime is a real crime. The Government have taken notice of that need, but more action is awaited. In May 2014, the then Secretary of State for Justice, who is now the Secretary of State for Transport, responded to the road justice campaign run by Cycling UK and Brake by announcing plans for a comprehensive review of road traffic offences and sentencing. However, after substantial delays to that review, the Government announced a consultation in December 2016 on a much more limited set of proposals. Those proposals included increasing the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving or death by careless driving while under the influence of drugs from 14 years to life imprisonment, and introducing a new sentence of causing serious injury by careless driving.
Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend has kindly referred twice to Brake, which is based in my constituency. She has not mentioned the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, whose watchword is basing good policy on good research. Is she going to say a little more about what the research needs are to make a clear correlation between what is happening on the roads and in the justice system?

Ruth Cadbury: I hope to be able to, but I realise that time is short, so I might not be able to go into the detail that my hon. Friend mentioned. He has just stepped down as chair of PACTS. I am also a member of PACTS, which has done an awful lot of excellent work in this place on road safety.

Due to the subjective nature of the definitions, too often we see the downgrading of cases from causing death by dangerous driving to other charges, simply because they are easier to prove. Using the term “careless” undermines and trivialises the gravitas of the offence and its impact on victims and their families. Cycling UK has done an excellent study called “Failure to see”, which expresses that stark difference in a range of different cases. I recommend that study to those involved in this subject.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is increasing concern among road users, particularly cyclists and pedestrians, that greater numbers of cars are being fitted with tinted or almost smoked glass? That makes it incredibly difficult for other road users to see the face of the driver and know whether they have been seen and the driver is aware of the potential danger.

Ruth Cadbury: That is clearly of concern. My understanding is that there are standards for tinted glass, but whether all vehicle owners are abiding by those standards is an issue. Those cases need to be prosecuted, and we all know that the resources for finding those offences are declining.

The Government have said that they will create a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving, and Ministers have said they will introduce new legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows. We look forward to that Bill. The charges and penalties for causing death or serious injury should be overhauled to ensure that prosecutors are not incentivised to opt for an easier won charge. We look to the Sentencing Council for that work, for which I believe the Ministry of Justice has responsibility. Overall, we ask for closer collaboration between the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Transport to ensure joined-up thinking on the definition of offences, with each consulted on the other’s work. I do not mind which Department leads; I just want to see action.

Finally, I will talk about driving bans. I agree with Brake that driving is a privilege, not a right, and that those who have shown disregard for the law should not be allowed to drive. We have a well-respected system of penalty points in this country, based on the expectation that people lose their licence when they reach 12 penalty points as they clearly have made it too dangerous to operate the vehicle. But the system has not always been effective, particularly with speed violations. However, there is a loophole whereby many drivers who claim exceptional hardship in court manage to avoid losing
their licence. That right is not accorded to most other offences with a risk to life, so the loophole should be closed. These people have already had a second chance in totting up points. The guidelines for magistrates need to be looked at in that respect.

In most high-risk occupations, someone’s licence to operate is removed immediately if there is a suspicion that they were responsible for an offence that causes death or serious injury. The same should occur for driving offences. Anyone arrested on suspicion of an offence that carries a mandatory driving ban should have their driving licence temporarily suspended until the case reaches a conclusion or is dropped. The advantages are that it keeps the issue out of court, is understandable, is instant and avoids the “innocent until proven guilty” problem. It would also have a deterrent effect. An alternative would be for anyone charged after killing or seriously injuring another to have their licence removed as a condition of bail. In the time it takes for a case to come to court, the driver charged can continue driving, potentially putting others in danger. The first option is the better one.

Thank you, Mr Betts. My colleague the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk will cover the other issues.

9.45 am

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for leading this debate—I was delighted to co-sponsor the application for it. The fact that we are both here today, representing different parties and very different constituencies, goes to show how this issue affects all parts of the United Kingdom. My thanks also go to the road charity Brake, Sustrans and Cycling UK for providing helpful information on the topic ahead of today’s debate.

This is absolutely not a debate about motorists against cyclists. For the record, I am both. Road users are not tribes of people competing for space on our tarmac. Road users are simply people—our constituents, our friends and our relatives—trying only to get around, whether that be on foot, on bike or by car. If we want to make our roads a safer place, the statistics do not lie: more than 99% of pedestrian deaths in the UK are caused by motorised vehicles. It does not take a degree in physics to understand that 1 tonne of metal travelling at high speed has the potential to cause greater harm than a 15 kg bike going at 15 mph on a good day. In the face of that, it is abundantly clear that if we want to make our roads safer, cutting down on irresponsible driving must be the priority.

The hon. Lady has already spoken about the need for a review of road traffic laws, particularly on dangerous and careless driving, and I would like to associate myself with those remarks. Another area that we need to look at closely is the law on hit and run offences. The current maximum prison sentence for failing to stop is six months. There is already a presumption against short custodial sentences in Scotland, and offenders are automatically let out early across the UK. That means that someone convicted of a failure to stop offence often escapes a custodial sentence completely.

**Mr Marcus Jones** (Nuneaton) (Con): I refer my hon. Friend to the case of Sean Morley, who was hit and killed on the A444 just outside Nuneaton. He survived for three hours after he was hit by a car. Regrettably, he was not discovered for several hours and he died. The driver was later convicted of failing to stop and failing to report an accident and was given a 16-week sentence. I do not think anyone would argue that that was not completely inadequate. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not only sentencing that needs to be far stronger, but the sentencing guidelines given to judges?

**John Lamont**: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are too many tragic cases like that involving our constituents. I will come to that point later in my contribution.

Failure to stop means a motorist was involved in an accident with another vehicle or person and was aware of the incident, but drove off anyway, with no thought about the damage or hurt caused. However, it can also be used as a means to escape a more serious punishment, such as if a drunk driver fails to stop in order to sober up. Failure to stop is a serious offence that should be treated seriously. It needs to end and we need to increase the maximum penalty to be in line with the maximum penalty for dangerous driving.

Another relatively simple measure to improve road safety would be to look at car-dooring. I think most cyclists are aware of the danger or have had to swerve to avoid a door opening in their path. I have had to do that on a number of occasions. I welcome the Government’s announcement that The Highway Code will be reviewed to include the so-called Dutch reach, where people open a car door with the hand furthest from the door. I hope that that will be included as a requirement so that learner drivers are taught it as a standard part of their lessons and test.

**Matt Western**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this important debate this morning. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the standardisation of helmet cams for cyclists and dashboard-mounted cams would provide the sort of evidence that could help bring to justice cases such as he has described in his speech?

**John Lamont**: I am grateful for that intervention. We should look at anything that can gather more evidence to help prosecutors. Ultimately we want to make our roads as safe as possible for all road users and deter irresponsible behaviour. If cameras contribute towards that, they would be beneficial.

However, we need to also look at whether a new offence needs to be created. Between 2011 and 2015, more than 3,100 people were recorded as being injured or killed as a result of a vehicle door being opened negligently, including cyclist Sam Harding, who was killed in August 2012 when a driver opened his plastic-tinted door in Sam’s path, knocking him under a bus. The maximum penalty for opening a car door negligently was a £1,000 fine, so the Crown Prosecution Service tried, unsuccessfully, to prosecute for manslaughter. The driver responsible received only a £200 fine. Clearly, this area of the law might not be working and needs to be reviewed.
Mr Sheerman: I am a little worried. Emotionally I want to support the hon. Gentleman, but first, the research on exemplary sentencing and a reduction in casualties is not strong. Secondly, when it comes to car-dooring as a serious offence—a lot of young and inexperienced people do it—does he agree that technology is rapidly helping us? New cars can assist us and tell us if there is a car or motorcyclist overtaking.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but for the sake of our justice system, it cannot be right that a life is lost and the person responsible for that loss of life faces only a £200 penalty as a consequence. There is surely something fundamentally wrong with our justice system if that is how it works. It is clearly not good either for the victim or for their friends and family if justice is not seen to be delivered, so I think there is a strong case to look at sentencing and the guidance given to the judiciary in such cases.

We are calling for a much wider review of road safety offences than is currently proposed. The Government have taken action, which is to be welcomed. The announcement of life sentences for causing death by dangerous driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol was overdue, although it needs to be implemented soon. The Department for Transport also has plans for a pilot scheme that will offer driving instructors training to put cyclists’ safety at the forefront of their minds when teaching new drivers, and The Highway Code review, with a focus on cyclist and pedestrian safety, is also a good step forward. However, the Government need a wide-ranging review of motoring offences as a matter of urgency.

The Government are right to look again at the law surrounding injury or fatalities caused by cyclists. I have every sympathy with Matt Briggs, who lost his wife, Kim, when she was killed by a reckless cyclist. Kim’s father is a constituent of mine who lives in Coldstream, my own town. It makes no sense to focus on cycling offences without reviewing the much greater number of motorist offences. It is time for the Government to improve road safety for our most vulnerable road users, clear up the inconsistencies caused by the current dangerous and careless driving offences, and review the law on penalty points and hit and run offences.

My party rightly has a reputation for being tough on crime, but I feel we make an exception as a party—indeed, we make an exception as a society—if the crime is committed behind the wheel. Perhaps it is because cars are so commonplace and so central to our daily lives that their potential danger has become normalised. It is time to tackle this issue and send out a clear message to the small minority of irresponsible motorists that the safety of vulnerable road users is more important. I want to support the hon. Gentleman, but first, the changes . So families continue to suffer , and the changes .

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. We have nine Back-Bench speakers to come, which means an absolute maximum of four minutes each. Please do not go any longer than that.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I want to talk about deaths and serious injuries caused by dangerous drivers and the legislation around sentencing.

Many Members will be aware that in response to pressure and campaigning from bereaved families, MPs and the road safety charity Brake with its “Roads to Justice” campaign, the Government finally agreed in December 2016 to hold a consultation on sentencing for those who cause death and serious injury by dangerous driving. The consultation ran until February 2017 and received more than 9,000 responses.

In October last year, the Government announced that, as a result of the consultation, they would introduce tougher sentences for those causing death and serious injury by dangerous driving, including the possibility of life sentences to replace the current maximum sentence of 14 years. When that was announced more than a year ago, there was much relief among campaigners and bereaved families that at last the Government were taking action to ensure that other families would not have to suffer the same injustices. Not only were those families sentenced to a lifetime of grief at the loss of a loved one, but they suffered the injustice of seeing their loved one’s killer receive a prison sentence of just a few years.

Ian and Dawn Brown-Lartey, in my constituency, had a 25-year-old son, Joseph, who was killed by a 19-year-old driving an uninsured and unlicensed hired Audi at 80 mph in a 30 mph zone. He ran through a red light and smashed into Joseph’s car, killing him outright. Joseph’s killer was imprisoned for six years in May 2015 and has since been released on licence after serving half his sentence. Joseph’s father, Ian, has accused the Government of paying lip service to their promises a year ago to impose stiffer punishments on the most dangerous offenders who cause fatal crashes, because nothing has happened since then. No draft legislation has appeared and, despite numerous questions, letters and debates, no changes have been made to the sentencing guidelines. The longer the Government drag their feet over implementing the changes, the more families will continue to suffer.

In just the past two weeks in my constituency we have had one fatality and two cases of serious injury to pedestrians on our roads. In two out of the three cases the drivers were arrested for dangerous driving. When I read those stories in the local paper, my heart sank at the thought of the anguish that the victims’ families must be going through, not only in dealing with death or serious injury, but knowing that, with the law as it stands, if the drivers are convicted of dangerous driving they will serve only a short sentence.

With the anniversary of the Government’s announcement that tougher sentences would be introduced, and with no action having yet been taken, I again wrote to the Ministry of Justice asking when the legislation would be passed. Disappointingly, the message I received yesterday was that there was no available legislative slot to introduce a Bill, or a suitable Bill that could be used to introduce the changes. So families continue to suffer, and the Government, having promised bereaved families more than a year ago that they would take action, have delivered nothing.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire,
Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for bringing this important issue to the House’s attention. It is right that we adequately address the problem of accidents that lead to serious injury or death. It therefore seems incomprehensible to me that the matter of horse safety, given the opportunity, is not being considered by the Government.

I urge the Minister not to overlook the matter of equestrian safety when exploring new road traffic offences and subsequent sentencing. The similarities to cyclists are stark. It therefore seems incomprehensible that the matter of horse safety, given the opportunity, is not being considered by the Government.

10.3 am

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding over the debate, Mr Betts. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). I congratulate my hon. Friends the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing this important debate. I also thank the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, Cycling UK and Brake for their briefings.

Today’s debate concerns the legal framework. First, the police need to catch those who break road safety laws, and to do that they need to be there. I would be grateful if the Minister advised us on what discussions he has had with Ministers in the Home Office about the loss of road traffic officers in recent years. Secondly, sentences need to be handed down. Thirdly, there need to be clear legal definitions and fair punishment.

We have heard, Cycling UK, along with road crash victims’ charities Brake and RoadPeace, are calling for the Government to review road traffic offences and penalties, to ensure that the law delivers just and safe outcomes for all road users. I was concerned to learn that the number of driving bans imposed by English and Welsh courts has declined by 60% in 11 years, from 155,000 in 2005 to just 62,000 in 2016. Will the Minister clarify what is happening?

In June 2017, more than 10,000 drivers in Britain were still allowed to drive despite having more than 12 points on their licence, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth mentioned. Will the Minister tell us whether that troubles him? Moreover, last year, police forces in England and Wales carried out the lowest number of breath tests since records began in 2002, according to Home Office figures. Is that indicative of a policy change from the Government, or does it also reflect a reduction in police traffic officer numbers?

The prevalence of uninsured drivers, which PACTS links to dangerous driving, road casualties and wider criminality, is also worrying. Will the Minister advise on whether that troubles him? What discussions have taken place with the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs Council to address those matters?

Along with PACTS, I support the establishment of a new offence of causing death or serious injury by dangerous and careless cycling. However, we would like the Government to commission a broader review covering a wider range of dangerous road behaviour, rather than focusing just on cyclists. Cycling UK has issued suggestions on what such a review, akin to what was promised in 2014, could examine. It advises that the review should clarify the definitions of “dangerous” and “careless”, review the accompanying maximum sentences, remove the ability of convicted drivers to avoid driving bans and consider introducing a penalty for car-dooring, and ensure that any revisions to cycling offences and penalties reflect key differences between driving and cycling.
Clearly we need a full review. As a cyclist myself, I see other cyclists ignoring the rules of the road. Some cyclists need a judicial shock, but other road users need one even more. The numbers killed and seriously injured on our roads have stagnated in recent years. The Ministry of Justice has an important role to play in protecting the vulnerable and reducing those figures. I look forward to hearing how the Minister intends to assist with that project.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I associate myself completely with the comments made about the need for greater clarity on the definition of careless and dangerous driving, for tougher penalties and tougher action on driving disqualification, and for tougher penalties on hit and run drivers.

I will raise some issues that have not been mentioned so far, which are highly relevant to road safety. I have constituents who work in the haulage industry who tell me that the rest centres provided for them in retail distribution centres are often such that they cannot rest. They are noisy and crowded, and there is nowhere that is comfortable for them. They are prevented from lying down in the bed in the back of their trucks during rest periods. That says to me that many drivers who are getting back into their lorries after a supposed rest period are not rested, and that they could rest safely if they could sleep in quietness in the back of their cabs. That is not allowed in many retail distribution centres, which is a serious issue. I would like the Minister to take that back to the Department for Transport.

Another road safety issue is people registering their vehicles at addresses of convenience—a Post Office box address. When a letter comes through the door because the person has been speeding, the authorities cannot take action. Bedfordshire police did a major study of that a few years ago, and I pay tribute to Sergeant Sean Quinn. The study showed that thousands of penalties were not being acted on because cars were being registered at addresses of convenience. That is a serious issue that puts some drivers beyond the law and puts us all in danger.

There is a similar issue with foreign licence plates. So far this year, Central Bedfordshire Council has issued 335 parking enforcement notices to vehicles with foreign plates, 250 of which have been cancelled because they cannot trace the driver. That applies not only to parking but to speed cameras. Again, drivers can drive with impunity. It is an offence not to register a foreign vehicle if someone has been here for six months. The police cannot track that, and I do not believe that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is doing so either. That is another loophole in the law that makes the roads more dangerous for us all.

False number plates have also been drawn to my attention. People make up a false number plate, and then commit crime or drive dangerously. Again, they cannot be traced and are beyond the law. That too is a serious offence, which I do not think that the authorities have caught up with properly.

Potholes are highly relevant to the debate. A constituent told me about £500 of damage to his car recently. For a cyclist, of course, swerving to avoid a pothole can lead to serious injury or death, and has done on a number of occasions. That is why I welcome the extra money going towards our roads. We need to realise that potholes can lead to serious injury or death for cyclists.

I completely support the points that have been made about car-dooring. The Dutch reach should be standard; it should be taught by every driving instructor and made part of the driving test, because we all need to get used to using it. I speak as someone who drove into the open door of a council dustcart many years ago and was injured.

Finally, we need a degree of civility and understanding. Whether we are on a horse, in a car or on a bicycle, we need to show one another courtesy and civility. It is not difficult to slow down or pass wide. Motorists, cyclists and horse riders are all in different positions, but proper courtesy and consideration to all of us would keep us all safer.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes because there seem to be more hon. Members who want to speak. I will need to call the winding-up speakers at 10.29 am.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I welcome this opportunity to debate road safety again. I have said on many occasions that although I do not think that any one approach alone can make our roads safer, an improved legal framework is essential if we are to reduce deaths and deliver justice for victims and their families.

In 2017, we saw the highest number of road deaths since 2011. In West Yorkshire, 815 people were killed or seriously injured in road traffic crashes last year. The child casualty rate in my constituency is 52% higher than the national average, and progress in reducing deaths and serious injuries has been 30% slower than elsewhere. Indeed, my constituency has one of the highest rates in the country of children being killed or seriously injured on our roads.

In the short time available, I would like to focus on a few areas in which we need to make changes; I hope the Minister will be able to respond to my points. First, as ever, I must raise the issue of how the law deals with drivers who cause death through dangerous or careless driving. As many hon. Members present will know, in October 2017, following a consultation, the Ministry of Justice announced a series of changes to the law on death by dangerous and careless driving, including life sentences for those who cause death by dangerous driving and for careless drivers who kill while under the influence of drink or drugs, as well as a new offence of causing serious injury through careless driving. The Government now claim that those changes will be incorporated into a review of cycle safety.

I have to say that that is completely unacceptable. It is right that the Government review cycle laws, but it is just not good enough that the changes already announced to sentencing are being rolled into an open-ended process. Those changes have still not been implemented, and we have not received a satisfactory answer about why there
has been a delay. We still do not know when the changes will finally come into force. I appeal to the Minister to take the opportunity to finally give us some answers.

Finally, I turn to points and disqualification, in particular the “exceptional hardship” loophole. We must ensure that the exceptional hardship rule, which allows drivers to keep their licence even when they have reached 12 points, is not abused. Data from the DVLA shows that in Bradford alone, more than 200 people successfully used the exceptional hardship argument last year to escape a ban. Across Britain, 11,000 drivers still have their driving licences, despite passing the points limit of 12. Some have 40 or 50 points. We cannot allow drivers who have consistently broken the rules to continue driving. It makes a mockery of our laws and puts other road users at risk.

As always, I will end with a reminder of the immense human cost of dangerous driving. Every family who has lost a loved one in a road crash knows just how devastating it is. Anything that we can do to make our roads safer, including creating a stronger legal framework, must be done as a matter of urgency.

10.13 am

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Inactivity is far more dangerous to people’s health than cycling or walking. We need to get the message out loud and clear that cycling and walking are great for our health, and we need to get Britain moving. One of the greatest deterrents, however, particularly for parents, is fear of the danger of our roads.

I will add to points made by other hon. Members by speaking about those drivers who escape all consequences. I suggest to the Minister that we need to get across the immediacy and certainty of consequences. The line between careless and dangerous driving is a very blurred one; today’s careless driver is tomorrow’s dangerous driver. We need to ensure that people do not entirely escape consequences, and that they know what will follow. I agree that we need to close the exceptional hardship loophole. Merely inconveniencing and fining those who are at the beginning of their journey to becoming dangerous drivers is not enough.

I also ask the Minister to consider the role of restorative justice. To give an example, I got the phone call that no parent wants to get, telling me that my daughter was unconscious in the back of an ambulance. While wearing hi-vis in a cycle lane, she had been knocked off her bicycle by a careless or even dangerous driver who was in a hurry and was turning into a side road. If my daughter had not been wearing a cycle helmet, she would undoubtedly have been killed or very seriously injured. I was shocked that she was interviewed in the casualty department while she was still concussed.

There were no consequences whatever for the driver. My daughter is not a vindictive person and nor am I, but at the very least I would have expected someone to investigate the incident. Witnesses came forward and were happy to testify, but nothing happened. When someone has been very seriously injured in such a collision, restorative justice could play a role. I hope the Minister will consider how we can ensure that drivers meet the person whom they have injured. Until that takes place, they should face some immediate consequences—a ban, at least.

10.16 am

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. Let me take the opportunity to contextualise the debate by showing the real impact of unsafe road behaviour when appropriate action is not taken. We should all aim for zero deaths and injuries on our roads and pavements, and the only way to achieve that is by supporting road safety with practical investment and appropriate legislation.

On Saturday, I attended a beautiful service at St Martin’s church at Birmingham’s first World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims. I was extremely honoured to have been invited to the event by RoadPeace. It was touching to remember all those who have lost their lives. Since the day was first commemorated 25 years ago, more than 30 million people have died on the world’s roads, including in the horrific scenes in my constituency last year in which six people were killed.

To bring focus to the issue and to the need for strong and fair judicial structures around road safety, I would like to read an extract from the poem that I read this weekend alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey):

“This is not the way things were supposed to be
To stare at a plaque with the words ‘Remember me’
And be filled with thoughts of you.
It had seemed that time was limitless, and there was still so much to say;
It had never occurred that one so full of life could be confined to yesterday.
Back then, road deaths were just stories to us, small segments on the news,
And we never quite understood all the fuss;
Until we became the next family to walk in those shoes.”

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): In one terrible 24-hour period, three young people and four others were seriously injured on Greater Manchester roads. Our road traffic laws are failing to deliver justice or promote road safety. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must review road safety in its entirety and ensure that we have measures to protect vulnerable road users such as those who have been killed in Greater Manchester?

Preet Kaur Gill: I absolutely agree.

The poem that I have just read was written by Lucy Harrison, the sister of my constituent. She lost her brother when a car going at 93 mph hit him as he crossed the road. Having had him taken from them, his family had to go through a trial and the Court of Appeal before the driver who caused the crash, and who had failed to stop, was given a sentence of four and a half years. The driver is now due to be released after serving just two years.

One point that Lucy has raised is that people talk about the incident as an accident. These crashes are not accidents. Road safety legislation is in place to make sure that people feel safe on and around our roads. If someone breaks the law and commits a crime on the road, we must call it what it is. She is therefore calling for tougher sentencing and a change in society’s perception of death by dangerous driving.
[Preet Kaur Gill]

Any road policy designed to keep all road and pavement users safe, regardless of their mode of transport, requires an effective road justice system. A year on from the announcement of tougher sentences for drivers who kill, the Government have failed to introduce legislation. Families of road crash victims across the UK are still waiting for justice. As Lucy says, people need to see that her brother “was a human with a family, not just a statistic, because it can just be like another road death where he became a statistic or a story.” On behalf of Lucy, Tony Worth and the many other families of victims, I urge the Government to deliver justice for road crash victims and keep the dangerous drivers off the road.

10.19 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for bringing this debate forward.

The Road Safety Foundation’s annual report, “Getting back on track”, which was launched in partnership with Ageas UK, clearly says that if we had been on track to halve road deaths in this decade, in line with international targets, an extra 2,549 people would not have lost their lives between 2010 and 2017. Some 1,793 people were killed in road crashes in 2017, and 73 people were killed or seriously injured every day. Motorcycle fatalities increased by 9% from 319 in 2016 to 349 in 2017. In comparison with what the UK Government spend on education and GP services, £35 billion, or nearly 2% of GDP, is lost as a result of road crashes each year. There is a financial cost.

As other hon. Members have done, I want to talk about how this issue has affected me. My brother Keith, who is 6 feet 2 inches, was involved in a motorbike accident. Now he has carers who come in four times a day. He cannot manage his money. He cannot speak or think like he once did. My mother looks after him, and everyone tries to help. Sometimes, we see the accidents but not the effect on the families. An accident in a sport that Keith loved has had a very clear impact on him and our family.

Across our constituencies, there are those who have lost loved ones, or who have lost their limbs or their way of life in an accident. More than saving money, better road safety is about saving lives and the quality of those lives.

We have talked many times in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber about road safety, and I want in particular to mention road safety around schools. Two schools in my constituency have 20 mph zones around them, but there are many others that still have a need for safety, such as Grey Abbey Primary School, which dates back to 1847 and sits on a 90° blind bend in the road. There needs to be help for that.

Ring-fenced funding would mean more traffic-calming schemes, and more traffic-calming schemes would mean fewer accidents; importantly, reduced speed means less damage to children. Texting while driving and distracting friends while driving also need to be addressed. It is estimated that if the Government were to invest £75 million per year over the next five years, 1,450 people would be spared the trauma of death or injury. The value of injury prevention exceeds half a billion over the same period. For every £1 invested in safer roads, £4.40 of economic value is created. The figures on the finances are very clear.

While we do not have a devolved Government in Northern Ireland due to the intransigence of Sinn Féin, I ask the Minister to ring-fence funding and ensure that the relevant Department in Northern Ireland understands what is expected from that additional funding.

10.22 am

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on securing this debate. As we have heard, this is an increasing problem and an ever present danger on our roads. Just two months ago in my constituency, over a four-week period there were three deaths on our streets—Emscote Road, Radford Road and Banbury Road—and numerous road traffic accidents.

We have to change attitudes on how we view and use road space. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), we need to encourage more people to use the road space, while making provision for the safety of all users. These are not motorways; they are roads for all to use. Alongside introducing changes to the legal framework, we need to ensure that we are changing behaviour at the same time.

Clearly, there are many causes. There are increasing pressures in modern life—pressures to get to work and to get the kids to school, and so on—but there are also a greater number of delivery drivers. More and more people are using the internet to shop and there are more and more deliveries to home and so on. Many of those delivery drivers, in the new gig economy, are being forced to work at such a pace that they are perhaps less observant of regulations and other road users than they might ordinarily be. They are under more and more pressure. Likewise, new housing developments around our towns put more pressure on the central town area infrastructure, with insufficient capacity to deal with the additional road use.

We also see a lack of enforcement of speed limits on our streets, with fewer police and the removal of cameras. When I served on the county council, I and other Labour councillors introduced a speed watch programme. It was great, but wearing high visibility jackets was hardly a deterrent to people speeding in our towns.

I would welcome more 20 mph zones in our town centres, which would send out a very clear message for more measured speeds in our town centres. I would like to see tougher sentences on people who fail to stop—the existing six months for leaving the scene of a crime is ridiculous. Likewise, the loophole for those who have 12 points on their licence is quite ridiculous, given the seriousness of their convictions. Finally, is it acceptable to have insurance products that insure someone against losing their licence? I would say no.

10.25 am

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I recently stood down as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for transport safety, and retain my role as chair of the charity the Parliamentary Advisory Council for

This issue is rightly called the greatest epidemic of our times by the United Nations. Some 1.3 million people are being killed on our roads, and 10 times that number are being seriously injured. It is an enormous challenge for all of us.

When I introduced my first private Member’s Bill, to ban children from being carried unrestrained in cars, and when I started PACTS and organised the seatbelt legislation, we had one mantra, which was to base all our work on great research. If there are good laws based on great research, enforced rigorously and fairly, that leads to results, and we have seen a reduction in deaths and serious injuries across most of Europe. We need to expand that further. This is a timely debate, as it is Road Safety Week. We have this fine organisation, PACTS, which has organised its work over many years on research, on good laws and on keeping the population of the country with us, which is very important. My plea today is that we keep our minds on evidence-based research.

I know about the feelings when someone is tragically killed. I came into this road safety area after a terrible accident on returning with my No. 2 daughter from her christening. It was a dreadful smash, and thank God we survived. Ever since then, I have been passionate about saving these lives, but we can get carried away. This is not about vengeance. The laws should be right and commensurate. Sometimes, we see appeals for tough legislation and tough penalties, and we can get carried away. I believe that if we look at getting the balance right and carrying the public with us, we will get a reduction and we will get better.

We are lucky to be seeing better technology, but I would add a word of caution. Technology in cars is improving all the time. People are safer and safer, in the safest of cars, but it is the vulnerable road users—the pedestrians, the cyclists, and those on little motorised two-wheelers most of all—who are being killed all over the world. This is a United Nations sustainable development goal, and it is as important here as it is all around the world.

Mr Clive Bettis (in the Chair): We have 10 minutes now for each of the Front-Bench spokespersons, and a short time for the mover of the motion to respond. I call Stuart McDonald for the Scottish National party.

10.28 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Bettis. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on securing the debate, and thank all hon. Members for their interventions. It is clear that we have some longstanding road safety campaigners in the Chamber today.

This debate has clearly struck a chord with my constituents, if my inbox is anything to go by. Like many others, they are concerned that the legal system is not quite up to the task that is fair, just and consistent between different types of road users. We heard some tragic stories from hon. Members about families who have been affected by dangerous and careless driving through the loss of loved ones, and that of course reminds us what this debate is ultimately all about.

A number of consultations and initiatives have been announced by the Government, although, as the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth flagged up, they have tended to proceed in a rather slow, piecemeal fashion. This debate allows us to look at a number of the issues in the round.

Ultimately, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said, what we want to see is a country where there are no fatalities on the road and where road users are as safe as we can make them. Clearly the legal framework has an important role to play. As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk pointed out, this is not about drivers against cyclists or any other road users. The emails that I have received highlight that, as he pointed out, 99.4% of pedestrian deaths in the UK involve a motor vehicle. The key challenge that we have is to answer the question of how we protect other road users against cars and other motor vehicles.

A number of Members made compelling arguments for some of the reforms that are suggested in the report of the all-party parliamentary group on cycling, “Cycling and the Justice System”. From my reading of the report, it contains a lot of sensible ideas. Prevention is clearly better than a cure, and I have no difficulty in supporting revisions to the Highway Code to address ambiguities about the responsibilities of road users—for example, in situations where cars are turning into side roads. I welcome some of the Government announcements on that.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) was absolutely right to mention horse riders’ safety, which constituents have contacted me about. He set out some of the alarming statistics about deaths—both of riders and horses—on the roads. Some 85% of such incidents are caused by drivers passing too fast or too close to horses. Campaigners argue that The Highway Code should include, at the very least, a strengthening of section 215 to include the British Horse Society’s “Dead Slow” advice to drivers on how to pass horses safely.

Among the other APPG suggestions, I would be happy to see changes to the format of driver testing to encourage better behaviour towards cyclists and pedestrians. I certainly would be sympathetic to, and supportive of, increased retesting of those who have committed offences. I am quite surprised that graduated driver licensing has not been brought up today, because I think there is still a strong argument for it. There is strong evidence that the benefits of such schemes outweigh any problems they might cause.

To come to the crux of the matter, the most difficult area of the debate is probably the adequacy of the offences that are applied to bad driving. I suppose that we aim to ensure that offences and the available punishments reflect both the level of blame or culpability in a driver’s behaviour and the impact that that culpable action has. A patchwork of offences seems to have developed over the years, and it is probably now time to consolidate them and ensure that they are comprehensive and fair.

It is absolutely true that there has to be a distinction between careless and dangerous driving, but perhaps those terms are not perfect. After all, careless driving is
very often dangerous driving. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) made the point that the term “careless” tends to sound trivial; perhaps words such as “negligent” or “reckless” would better reflect the legal distinction in driver behaviour. He also made some good points about the provision of road haulage rest facilities—the statistics show that many people involved in road traffic accidents are driving in the course of employment, so it is imperative that we ensure that those who drive for a living are supported in any way possible to do that safely.

While motor vehicles are the biggest challenge that we face, and cyclists are infinitely more sinned against than they are sinners, there are questions about how the law should deal with careless, reckless and dangerous cycling, as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk acknowledged. Given that we deal with serious cases by relying on Victorian laws that were designed for horses and carriages, it is probably time for an update to deal with the rare occasions when cyclists cause serious accidents, especially for pedestrians. In Scotland, there are offences such as culpable homicide and culpable and reckless conduct, but it is questionable how appropriate and practical those would be. A new statutory regime appears to be justified, but it is important to clarify that this is about ensuring justice—it is absolutely not about punishing cyclists. As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, we absolutely want more people to cycle.

On the stage at which offences have been proven, generally I would not seek ever-increasing sentences if education, technology or enforcement can provide an answer. However, it is alarming and surprising that we have on our roads more than 10,000 motor vehicle drivers with 12 or more penalty points on their licence, and that there has been a 60% drop in driver disqualifications in the past 10 years. It is essential that there is research on the reasons for those trends, because certainly they raise concerns that the current legal framework is at risk of being undermined by how it is implemented.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk raised the issue of hit and run. I am surprised to hear that the maximum sentence is six months, because that offence is akin to perverting the course of justice. That is something that perhaps has to be looked at again. I also sympathise with what he said about making car-dooring a specific offence. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) reminded us, all of this has to be based on research.

Our roads are certainly safer than in past times, but there is still plenty of room for improvement, and the justice system has a role to play. I thank all Members for their contributions today.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for securing the debate. I also thank Cycling UK, Brake and RoadPeace for the considerable campaigning that they have done in this area over the years.

I agree with the good doctor, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston): walking or cycling is clearly far better for people’s health than driving. From the contributions that we have heard today, it is clear that many aspects of our road traffic laws are uniquely problematic. I declare that I was a prosecutor for many years—one of those people who make a number of decisions about whether to charge somebody with reckless driving, driving without due care and attention, dangerous driving or other offences of that nature. I will explain some of the challenges that we faced as prosecutors.

We have heard that it is all too easy for someone who is not an inherently dangerous person to drive in a manner that none the less causes obvious and foreseeable danger, which explains the apparent reluctance of some jurors to convict drivers of offences that they can easily imagine committing themselves. That possibly also applies to justices of the peace and magistrates in the lower courts. Many colleagues have mentioned examples where it appears that the law has not been applied properly. The framework for dangerous and careless driving is unclear; more importantly, it is applied inconsistently. That obviously sends a poor message to people—it shows that our justice system is perhaps not operating effectively. As a result, it causes distress to the seriously injured and to bereaved road crash victims. It also reinforces the idea that road danger is to be tolerated rather than eliminated.

Cycling UK has highlighted a case of a driver seriously injuring a pedestrian outside East London’s Westfield shopping centre in February 2017, for which he received just nine points on his licence after pleading guilty to careless driving. He then sent his friends a bragging WhatsApp video saying, “Nine points ain’t stopping me from driving.” Nine months later, he was swerving in and out of traffic at 68 mph on a 30 mph south London street, killing a 19-year-old woman who had crossed the road in front of him. Other videos found on his phone included one captioned “rippling the road at 146 mph”, suggesting that he enjoyed driving dangerously and illegally on a regular basis. The failure to treat his first offence as dangerous driving allowed him to keep his licence, with fatal consequences. Obviously not everyone is in that situation—we have to keep perspective on this—but it demonstrates one of the problems that occurs in courts.

We know that the current distinction between careless and dangerous driving depends largely on whether the court believes that the accused person’s actions fell below, or far below, what would be expected of a competent and careful driver or cyclist. As we know, those terms are highly subjective, and they allow for huge variation in interpretation by individual magistrates and jurors. The distinction is supposed also to relate to whether a defendant’s actions objectively caused danger that should have been “obvious to a competent and careful driver”.

Evidently, however, prosecutors and courts continue to act as if the defendant’s state of mind were still relevant, despite the removal of reckless driving from the legal framework in the Road Traffic Act 1991. That suggests to me that there is a need for a review into the definitions of “dangerous” and “careless” offences in order to clarify whether the distinction relates to the level of danger caused by the defendant’s actions—an objective test—or to their state of mind, a subjective test.
I hope hon. Members will forgive me for being a bit technical with some examples. An objective test would be clarified by retaining "dangerous driving" but defining it in a way that had caused a danger that should have been obvious to a competent driver paying due care and attention, without depending on whether the defendant’s actions fell below or far below the standard expected of such a driver.

The lower-tier offence should perhaps be renamed “unsafe” or “negligent” driving, to clarify that the distinction has nothing to do with the driver’s state of mind. The need for that has been demonstrated in the car-dooring offences that hon. Members have mentioned. One example is the driver who was killed in August 2012 when a driver opened his car door into Sam’s path, knocking him under a bus. The driver had darkened his car windows with plastic tinting film, reducing their transparency to about 17% of normal levels. The CPS, concerned at the inadequate £1000 maximum penalty, charged him with manslaughter, but was unsuccessful. He received just a £200 fine.

That and several other fatal car-dooring cases, in which the drivers received fines of between £30 and £955, clearly indicate the need for tougher penalties and a proper test—perhaps a review of legislation on the issue. It is shocking that between 2011 and 2015, 3,108 people—including 2,009 cyclists—were recorded as being injured by a vehicle door being opened or closed negligently. Eight of those incidents resulted in fatalities.

We must be serious about strengthening the role of the justice system in deterring irresponsible road use and removing unsafe drivers from the roads. It is only right that the Government set up a review of road traffic offences and penalties. I remind the Minister that in 2014, the Ministry of Justice promised a comprehensive review of road traffic offences and sentencing, largely in response to the representations of various road crash victims’ groups. After substantial delays, however, the scope of that review was later reduced to two proposals. The first was to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving, or for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs, from 14 years to lifetime imprisonment. The second proposal was to introduce a new sentence of driving ban for offences where danger has been caused by someone who is not obviously a dangerous person, or replace them entirely. It needs to be made clear whether the distinction is supposed to relate to the level of danger caused by the defendant’s actions—an objective test—or their state of mind, which is a subjective test.

The review should also consider the accompanying maximum sentences, and perhaps make greater use of driving bans for offences where danger has been caused by someone who is not obviously a dangerous person, while retaining custody as a sentencing option for more obviously reckless behaviour or for repeat offenders.

Mr Sheerman: Does my hon. Friend agree that some unscrupulous members of her profession specialise in getting high-profile people—David Beckham, for example—off their driving charges, and does she think that is good or bad?

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady should know that she has only a minute or two remaining.

Yasmin Qureshi: I will not comment on individual cases—the courts made their decisions, and it would be improper of me to comment on them. Many hon. Members have referred to how the exceptional hardship plea is being used, and suggested that courts and magistrates have been granting it too readily. That clearly needs to be looked at. Maybe there needs to be a change in the sentencing guidelines that magistrates take into account when deciding whether to grant exceptional hardship. That area also needs to be revisited and reviewed. With respect to car-dooring offences, the Law Commission should perhaps consider whether there should be an accompanying offence that carries licence points.

I await the Minister’s response on a number of the issues I have raised, including the need for the Law Commission to look into these matters.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): If the Minister could finish by 10.58 am, that would allow two minutes for the mover of the motion to sum up. Thank you.

10.47 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I will do, Mr Betts; it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. It is also a pleasure to
take part in the debate. It is extraordinary; some of our most active and fittest colleagues are gathered in the Chamber to debate something that is very close to their hearts, and close to the hearts of millions of people up and down the country.

I will begin by reflecting on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), which was that, fundamentally, there is much more that we can do to protect cyclists, but we also need to reinforce the central message that immobility is much more dangerous for one’s health than walking or getting on a bicycle. In fact, the beginning of all this has to be our understanding of just how powerful and beneficial cycling and walking can be. Cycling is not only—as most of us who cycle know—the quickest way of getting to this place in the morning, it is also a way of moving that is much less damaging to the environment and much better for our health in the most astonishing range of ways. It is better for our weight, our bowels, our hearts, our skin, our sex lives—[Laughter.] Yes, much better for our sex lives; recent studies in the United States have shown that men who cycle regularly have the sex life of somebody five years younger than the average. Cycling is also much better for happiness. It should be greatly encouraged, and the more people we can get cycling and walking, the better.

The corollary is that if we are to encourage people to walk and cycle, we need to make sure that they can do so safely. Far too many people still are injured or killed while cycling. In any given year recently, more than 100 people on bicycles have been killed on the roads. We need to take that seriously, while also putting it in the context that, overall, we are making huge improvements in road safety.

Famously, for example, in 1926 when far fewer people owned motorcars, 5,000 people were killed on the roads. As recently as 1966, 8,000 people were killed in motor accidents in a year. Today, although still far too high, the number is 1,700—despite the fact that far more people own motorcars than in 1966 or, of course, 1926. We therefore should not be entirely gloomy. The second thing to put into context is that, as some right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, it is not only cyclists who we need to think about in terms of vulnerable road users.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) pointed out that 40 people a year on horses are killed on the roads, and far fewer people ride horses than bicycles, so proportionately someone is much more likely to be killed on a horse. About 400 or 450 people are killed walking and, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) reminded us, a similar number are killed on motorcycles—people are extremely vulnerable on a motorcycle on the road. Finally, of course, the largest number of people are killed in a motor vehicle. We should not suggest that anyone killed in a motor vehicle somehow deserves it because many are innocent victims, including children and families, who just happen to be travelling in that vehicle when it is hit.

Any approach to the subject therefore has to be comprehensive. I want to pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), the Member for the borders. They managed to provide a very comprehensive description of the range of things that need to happen if we are to protect cyclists. That begins right at the beginning in the way that we train people who drive motorcars, so with The Highway Code, and thinking about things such as the Dutch reach and how tests are conducted or professional drivers might be retested. It extends to road design and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) pointed out, questions of enforcement, not only sentencing but how the police conduct themselves, how evidence is gathered and how prosecutions are brought. As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, it also extends to thinking about rest periods for drivers, the potholes in the roads or, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) pointed out, questions of a changing gig economy and the kind of people travelling in our vehicles.

All of that needs to be the context, which is why we argue strongly that any real response must take into account not just us in the Ministry of Justice but the Department for Transport and the Home Office. Nevertheless, I am a Minister from the Ministry of Justice, so I will touch briefly on some of the legal issues raised by right hon. and hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk emphasised the serious issue of failure to stop. In examining it and making progress, we need to take into account the fact that there is a fundamental difference between the expectations of someone to report a driving offence, and of a burglar or murderer to report their offence: the premise, or presupposition, is that the driving offence is an accidental act. We therefore expect an individual of good will to have a duty of care and a responsibility to help the vulnerable victim in a way that the individual involved in other types of crime might not. That fundamental understanding of the difference between this type of crime and others should inform the approach that we take to the question of the failure to stop and the strong arguments made by my hon. Friend from the borders and others that we should increase the penalty.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned hardship, again a very serious point. There seems to be a serious discrepancy in the number of people able to claim extreme hardship. A small footnote to that, however, a caveat, is that it is important to remember that not all those claims of extreme hardship relate to the individual driving the motorcar; they often relate to the dependants of that individual—for example, a child with special needs who requires motorcar travel. Extreme hardship can therefore extend beyond the individual to the family. Nevertheless, I recognise that the number of people making such claims seems disproportionately large.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes mentioned restorative justice, but at the centre of everything is the question of careless or dangerous driving. That was discussed by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), who reflected on those distinctions, and the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who made some interesting jurisprudential points on culpability and consequence or, as she framed it, the objective test of the damage done compared with the subjective question of intent.
That is not something that should be trivialised or put aside—it is a fundamental principle of English law. On the one hand, we have the incredibly stark and horrifying impact on the victim and the victim’s family—the hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about that eloquently and movingly. That death and its consequences are final, destroying a life and the families that surround it, with eddying ripples that extend into broader society. On the other hand, that has to be balanced, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield pointed out, with seriousness about the nature of what happened at that moment. Some situations are genuinely accidents, and in others some of us might feel, “There but for the grace of God go I.” There is an important distinction between a careless act and a dangerous act. All of that needs to be balanced with the impact on the victim.

We have therefore concluded that we must now extend the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving to a life sentence, and the maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving under the influence of drink—alcohol—to a life sentence as well. That has been a difficult decision because of the question of balancing the impact on the victim with the culpability of the individual. However, in the end, the conclusion must be that someone who commits an extremely dangerous act in a vehicle is driving a weapon and committing an unlawful act. Ultimately, if a death results, that is morally equivalent to unlawful act manslaughter. Individuals under the influence of drink or drugs who get into a vehicle knowingly propel an extremely dangerous weapon, having consciously made a decision to incapacitate themselves. That is in direct contravention of their duty of care towards other road users and is therefore equivalent to gross negligence manslaughter. They should therefore face the penalty of a life sentence as a maximum.

In response to the questions asked by the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), therefore, we will be doing that. I will not delay people or waste their time with explanations about why, particularly in the middle of Brexit, parliamentary time has been limited, or why we feel that we need to take a comprehensive approach that brings in the Department for Transport and the Home Office, but we are determined to do it.

That is because cycling is incredibly important for our health, our environment and our connections with landscape and society. We have a particular duty of care and obligation to vulnerable road users. With that, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to an extremely stimulating and important debate, which will change the law.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank everyone for their co-operation on the timing. I ask Ruth Cadbury to wind up.

10.58 am

Ruth Cadbury: I, too, thank all Members who have spoken today. I will not have the chance to refer to everyone, so I will pick up on the issue of deterrence.

I am not a vindictive person and I am not generally into stiffer penalties, but driving is something we all do—most people drive—and we all want to avoid accidents. The deterrent of charges and penalties can be a factor in improving driver behaviour. I believe that that is why driver behaviour is better in Germany, in my experience. A different kind of deterrence to do with civil litigation is, I think, behind the much better driving that I experienced in the United States. This area of law is one in which deterrence is useful. Many Members also picked up on the inconsistency between penalties and sanctions, in particular when talking about the distinction between careless and dangerous driving.

I thank those Members who mentioned their constituents and families who have been affected by such tragedy, because that is, after all, what we are dealing with today. I welcome the fact that the Minister has again announced the increase in the maximum sentences and that there will be a review. He also mentioned that the MOJ and the Department for Transport will work closely together so that there is consistency in message, approach, consultation and response.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road safety and the legal framework.
Royal Navy Base: Bahrain

11 am

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the strategic importance of the new Royal Navy base in Bahrain.

I am pleased to introduce this debate about the strategic importance of the new Royal Navy base in Bahrain, HMS Juffair. I draw hon. Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, which shows that I have a long-standing and significant interest in the Kingdom of Bahrain. I have been going there for a number of years, most recently in October to look at the new naval base.

Let me explain briefly what the base is and what it does. It is a small but perfectly formed facility that, in simple terms, allows ships to be tendered, administered and maintained more efficiently. Up to a company group of people can live on the base—there are around 500 bed spaces. I was honoured to receive tremendous hospitality on my interesting visit in October, which was led by Commodore Steve Dainton, commander of the UK maritime component. I was pleased to go aboard the mine countermeasures vessel HMS Blyth and to discuss its role with Captain Drewett and the ship’s company. I would also like to put on the record the tremendous work that is being done by the defence attaché, Commander Paul Windsar, and of course the overall leadership that is provided by our ambassador in Bahrain, Simon Martin.

Most importantly, the base will allow our fleet of mine countermeasures vessels to make their contribution to the Combined Maritime Forces. Type 23 frigates will be able to use the base, too—it is my understanding that a Type 23 will soon be based there permanently—and destroyers and other vessels will also be able to take advantage of what it offers. The base is a huge step forward. It is the first new naval base in the middle east since 1971, and we should all wholeheartedly welcome it.

The base is hugely important to our bilateral relationship with the Kingdom of Bahrain. Many of us know that we have a long-standing relationship of at least two centuries with the kingdom. Because of the pressures it faces due to its location vis-à-vis Iran, the Bahraini state feels a sense of existential insecurity. It therefore relies on its allies to stand with it through thick and thin, and I am proud that this country has done that. Our tangible, permanent commitment to having a Royal Navy presence in the kingdom is of huge importance to our Bahraini friends. In fact, it is so important that they have been prepared to pay most of the costs of the base. That is of huge advantage to us—it allows us merely to man the facility. The reassurance the base provides our ally should not be understated.

That reassurance has a regional element, too. I mentioned that the mine countermeasures vessel contributes to the Combined Maritime Forces. Not many people know about that, but it is hugely important. It is a multinational force of some 33 nations that promotes the free flow of commerce over a huge area of the ocean—3.2 million square miles of international waters, not just in the Gulf but in the Red sea, the gulf of Aden, the Somali basin and the Indian ocean. The mine countermeasures vessels that Commodore Dainton commands make a hugely important contribution to that, in one of the most important areas for global trade.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): My hon. Friend is bringing to the House’s attention an important part of the Royal Navy’s expanding programme. Does he agree that, in a post-Brexit world, we will continue to be a global maritime nation? Geography and the way our trade works dictate that. The work that we will be able to start from Bahrain to keep those difficult waters open is critical to the UK’s future economic growth.

Leo Docherty: Indeed. Our contribution to global free trade and the free flow of commerce around the world will be more important than ever, and we are uniquely well placed, along with our allies—the United States and others—to play a key role in that.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I believe we are the only European country with such a base in the Arabian Gulf. Will my hon. Friend use his expertise in the region to continue to probe the Government about what steps are being taken to work with other Gulf Co-operation Council countries to ensure that the base is supported and expanded, given that more than 60% of the world’s oil flows through the Arabian Gulf?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I will mention that shortly, but absolutely, we should see this base as a model for the way we work with other GCC allies. I know there is significant appetite in Oman and Kuwait, for example, for greater co-operation between our militaries.

As my hon. Friend points out, we must remember that some 20% of the world’s oil flows through the strait of Hormuz. That is astonishing. The area of operations of the Combined Maritime Forces is at the epicentre of global trade, and we have a disproportionately positive impact on that. We have four mine countermeasures vessels, whose value and contribution is out of all proportion to what they cost us.

The base represents a significant defence engagement win. I am pleased that the Government have a defence engagement strategy, which was published in 2017. Of course the naval base has been in gestation since 2014, but it is good to see these themes and intent formalised in that document. The strategy is just a reminder—and what we see in Bahrain is an illustration of the fact—that defence can be a tremendously positive agent of foreign policy and is intertwined with our foreign policy objectives. Defence is not just about kinetic war-fighting operations; it can lead to tremendously important diplomatic and commercial outcomes.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. Does he agree that we must remember that if we, as a western democracy, do not engage, others will be only too happy to fill the void, as we see with the Chinese military base in Djibouti?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point that runs to the heart of the matter. If we wish to project our global influence on a basis that suits us and represents the values we stand for, we must do so. If we do not, others will, and they will do it less well and the outcome for everyone in the region will be worse. The national security objectives are clearly laid out. They are to protect our people, promote prosperity,
and project our global influence. I am confident that all those objectives are met by us having our base in Bahrain.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Many people will be disturbed to hear the hon. Gentleman refer to a close friendship with a country that has such a dismal human rights record. Will he use his relationship and experience with the Bahraini authorities to press them? If we are talking about our global influence, we should press those authorities to review their human rights record.

**Leo Docherty**: The influence and close relationships that we have allow us to do exactly that, and I encourage the hon. Lady to visit the Kingdom of Bahrain at the earliest opportunity to see the reality for herself.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): My hon. Friend is being gracious with his time. I served in Bahrain and the Gulf in operations in 2009 on HMS Kent, and I agree with everything he says about our influence in the region. He ran through the practical opportunities that having a base in Bahrain gives us, but does he agree that it is also a physical embodiment of what we are all talking about, namely global Britain? As we leave the European Union, such things demonstrate that we are not retreating from the global stage, and they are a demonstration of our intent not just east of Suez but around the world.

**Leo Docherty**: My hon. Friend is right. This is a demonstration of a model that perhaps we should use in other places in future. This is not just about the Royal Navy, because the capacity for the Army to stay as a company group at the UK naval facility in Juffair presents tremendous training and partnership opportunities with the Bahraini army, which would be to its benefit and to ours. That spirit of enduring partnership is the driver behind all this.

Will the Minister give us his judgment on the success of the establishment of the UK naval facility, perhaps say whether he agrees that we should use this model in other Gulf Co-operation Council states, and say whether on a global basis we can perhaps do such things in other parts of the world? I conclude by reiterating my gratitude to all those currently serving in the UK naval service, not just the ship’s company of HMS Blyth, but those serving in the Combined Maritime Forces and the UK maritime component in Bahrain. Their daily vigilance contributes significantly to the freedom and prosperity that we in this country enjoy.

11.13 am

**The Minister for the Armed Forces** (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this debate. As we have heard, he and other colleagues take a keen interest in defence and security developments in Bahrain and the wider Gulf region.

His Royal Highness the Duke of York officially opened the United Kingdom naval support facility in Bahrain on 5 April this year. It epitomises the importance that the UK places on its relationship with Bahrain and the security of the Gulf region, and the emphasis that the Ministry of Defence is placing on global Britain. It is the first permanent overseas Royal Navy establishment operating east of Suez in almost half a century, and part of the commitment to the Gulf region that the Prime Minister promised in Manama in December 2016, when she underlined her undertaking that: “Gulf security is our security”.

The UK NSF, which was a gracious gift of His Majesty King Hamad to mark the 200th anniversary in 2016 of our strong and enduring bilateral relationship, has increased the capabilities that already existed in Bahrain. It will allow the Royal Navy to provide better support for its vessels, including new aircraft carriers, and it has enabled the UK to permanently assign a Type 23 frigate to the Gulf from next spring. The UK NSF has been planned for long-term utility, strategically situated alongside the US navy 5th fleet, and it is one of our most advanced naval facilities. I stress that the complex is not a naval base as such because there are no dry docks, but we more recently opened a joint logistical support base at Duqm in Oman—I was honoured to be there for that opening—which will have dry docking capability for all Royal Navy ships.

The UK NSF is a joint asset and operates under Permanent Joint Headquarters command within the Operation Kipion joint operational area. The facility’s primary function is to provide appropriate levels of real-life support to personnel deployed to Bahrain, whether permanently shore-based, on contingent operations, on a deployed maritime unit or on short-term theatre visits. After PJHQ operational requirements have been met, UK NSF still has additional capacity to host around 100 visitors, with a surge capacity of an additional 300, up to a maximum site capacity of 549. It also provides engineering and logistics support to maritime units, and can host contingent forces for short periods. The capability is split into three broad categories: accommodation, welfare, and technical. Primarily, it supports our deployed naval force in the Gulf, providing maritime security for Bahrain, the wider region and the global economy.

As my hon. Friend said, the most important aspect of the UK NSF is what it enables our ships and people to deliver on operations. As I speak, five Royal Navy warships and two Royal Fleet Auxiliaries are deployed in the region, operated and supported by more than 1,500 personnel. They include our mine countermeasures force, which has been permanently based in Bahrain since 2006 and, as my hon. Friend said, is very much considered the jewel in the crown of the force by the Americans. The MCM force is made up of five ships—four mine countermeasures vessels supported by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship. That force conducts route survey and clears mines from the sea bed, as it did after the 2003 Iraq war, enabling the safe navigation of the waterways.

The Combined Maritime Forces, headquartered in Bahrain, is a coalition of 33 nations aligned in common purpose to conduct maritime security operations and provide security and stability. HMS Dragon, one of the UK’s Type 45 destroyers, is currently operating under the command of the CMF, as the latest example of the UK’s enduring commitment to the coalition. The CMF conducts operations to counter a broad range of threats to maritime security, from piracy to the transport of narcotics, weapons and other illicit cargoes that fund and fuel terrorism and criminal networks. It has had a
great deal of success—this year alone it has seized more than 46 metric tonnes of heroin and hashish, with a combined estimated value in excess of £43 million, at wholesale destination ports in the Gulf region. The street value in the UK would be many times that figure. The CMF has helped to bring about a significant reduction in piracy incidents since they peaked in 2010. The UK NSF provides the UK with a maritime centre in the region from which to respond to future humanitarian crises or natural disasters, and to conduct operations to protect the waterways and ensure the continued free flow of commerce. It makes possible our commitment to the enduring task of maritime security operations in the region.

Reinforcing the Prime Minister’s undertaking in 2016 that Gulf security is our security, the then Foreign Secretary announced that the UK would be spending £3 billion on defence commitments in the region over the next 10 years. It is clear that we cannot afford not to do so—as has been said, 40% of global oil production is shipped through the strait of Hormuz between our close ally Oman on one side and Iran, which is a challenge, on the other. It is the world’s most important maritime choke point. The wider Gulf contains two more of the world’s eight recognised maritime choke points, with the Bab-el-Mandeb at risk of miscalculation emanating from the persistent and tragic conflict in Yemen.

Daniel Kawczynski: The Minister has outlined the important practical aspects of the base, and he referred to Iran as a “challenge”. Does he agree that the base also has an important political symbolic aspect, which is that the United Kingdom will never tolerate any interference in the sovereignty of Bahrain?

Mark Lancaster: Indeed. My hon. Friend makes a valuable point that returns to the Prime Minister’s statement that Gulf security is our security. We have a long-standing relationship with Bahrain. This facility is part of that historic relationship, and we will continue to play our part in the region, as I am demonstrating. The political statement is there for all to see.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The facility is of great importance to the Royal Navy, but I should be grateful if the Minister would touch on how it shapes changing deployments, and in particular how there can be greater crew rotation on ships when they are permanently forward-deployed in the Gulf rather than having to steam from Britain, including from such fantastic ports as Devonport, off to the Gulf and back again.

Mark Lancaster: That is a valuable point. Of course, historically, in the deployment of frigates and destroyers much time has been lost in transit to the region, and the time taken affects their ability to be on operations. The naval support facility will, as I mentioned earlier, enable us to forward-deploy in the first instance a Type 23 frigate for a sustained period—far longer than the initial six months, because the vessel itself will stay in the region, getting rid of those transit times. Because of the facilities that we have there, we shall simply be able to rotate the crew through by aircraft. That means that the facility is far better for the crews. The accommodation is far superior to that on a ship. Equally, there is more predictability about the deployment; from a family perspective deployments are more set, as they come without some of the challenges of having to move the ship around the world. All in all, not only is the facility great for our persistent presence in the region; it is of major benefit to crews and families, so I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

On 7 July 2015, the National Security Council agreed a Gulf strategy to protect and promote the UK’s interests in the six Gulf Co-operation Council states, recognising their importance in addressing direct threats to the UK from terrorism, extremism and organised crime, for our energy security and for wider regional stability. The NSC Gulf strategy is delivered through increased and integrated cross-Government engagement and activity, including working with partners, allies and international organisations. Aligned with the strategy, the MOD has a leading role in promoting regional security and stability, not least by its contribution to multinational forces engaged against Daesh and other violent extremist organisations and malign influences, thereby deterring aggression and combating transnational crime in the Gulf and beyond. We are working more often and more closely to build the capability of Gulf states’ security forces, promoting our high standards of operational effectiveness and conduct.

The UK’s commitment to Gulf security has been epitomised by Exercise Saif Sareea 3 in Oman, which I was privileged to open last month. It finished on 5 November with an impressive firepower demonstration attended by all GCC countries along with wider middle east and global partners. It was the UK’s largest bilateral exercise for 17 years, since Saif Sareea II, with 5,500 UK troops deployed alongside 70,000 Omanis. Elements of the UK force are now conducting defence engagement activity with our other GCC partners. Saif Sareea 3 has been a tremendous success, not only as a military exercise but also in view of the fact that it has involved cross-Government Ministries in Oman working in close co-operation with counterparts from Her Majesty’s Government on crisis response and resilience activity. It has been an exemplar of HMG fusion activity, underpinned by a detailed strategic communications campaign that has seen the exercise dominate Omani print and social media for almost its entire month-long duration, with extensive exposure across the Gulf.

I want to underline why the base has such an impact across the region, including with other nations. During his visit at the beginning of November the Secretary of State for Defence announced the Oman-British joint training base, further delivering on the Prime Minister’s Manama commitment. That relates to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot made about how we can continue the process. The new training facility will be tested with its first joint exercise with the Omanis in March next year. It will be supported by the joint logistics support base at Dugm, which, as I mentioned, I had the honour of opening at the beginning of Saif Sareea 3 in October.

Saif Sareea 3 has been far more than just a bilateral military exercise. It has been a demonstration of our commitment to Oman and the wider Gulf region and will leave behind a legacy for decades to come. The Secretary of State for Defence underlined our commitment to the region when the UK NSF was opened in April.
“Our Armed Forces are the face of Global Britain and our presence in Bahrain will play a vital role in keeping Britain safe as well as underpinning security in the Gulf.”

He went on to say—and I agree wholeheartedly:

“Britain is a major player on the world stage and this new Naval Support Facility will help us tackle the growing threats to our nation wherever they are across the globe and protecting our way of life.”

That is exactly the point that many of my hon. Friends have made during the debate. Furthermore, in the context of global Britain, the UK NSF will be the hub of our naval operations across the Indian ocean and potentially further afield for decades to come. I hope I have given Members the assurance of the strategic importance of the Royal Navy’s new facility in Bahrain.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

2019 Loan Charge

[Mr CHARLES WALKER in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the 2019 loan charge.

I will take a moment to say how glad I am to serve once again under your chairmanship from the Back Benches, Mr Walker.

It is right that everyone, both individuals and corporations, should pay the correct amount of tax, and I welcome the Government’s commitment to a fairer tax system. I was pleased to see that the UK’s tax gap has fallen to a record low of 5.7% in recent months.

I should start by explaining what the loan charge is. The gov.uk website explains:

“Loan schemes—otherwise known as ‘disguised remuneration’ schemes—are used to avoid paying Income Tax and National Insurance.”

The loan charge was announced at the 2016 Budget. The policy ensures that users of tax avoidance loan schemes pay their share of tax and is expected to protect £3.2 billion for the UK’s vital public services. The website also says:

“The loan charge works by adding together all outstanding loans and taxing them as income in one year.”

Therein lies the difficulty, and the fundamental cause of the impact on individuals and families.

In 2005, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said:

“Certainty and transparency are the hallmarks of a fair, effective and competitive tax system. A taxpayer is entitled to know with certainty…what he may or may not do in planning his tax affairs.”—[Official Report, 7 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 1139.]

That is why I object to retrospective legislation that undermines the rule of law.

The introduction of the 2019 loan charge has been beset by challenges, confusion and complications. Over 100 MPs have signed early-day motion 1239 calling on the Government to significantly revise this piece of legislation. I am glad we are meeting today in this well-attended debate to consider the impact of the loan charge.

In the 2016 Budget, the Government announced that they would introduce legislation to tackle disguised remuneration schemes. Statutory provision was included in the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017, with further provisions included in the Finance Bill introduced after the autumn Budget last November, now the Finance Act 2018. The Government say they will protect £3.2 billion by taking action to tackle both historic and continued use of these schemes. That is a not inconsiderable sum. It will include a new charge on loans paid through disguised remuneration schemes that have not been taxed and are still outstanding on 5 April 2019.

Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs states that the schemes affected by the 2019 loan charge were not and never have been legal. However, that is disputed by the Loan Charge Action Group. I refer to a letter by the Chancellor of the 19th of this month, published today on the Treasury Committee website. The Chancellor writes:

“Finally, I would like to clarify my comments to the Committee in reference to the use of disguised remuneration (DR) schemes which I described as ‘tax evasion’. I should have said ‘tax avoidance’, and that in the Government’s view, tax was always due.”
That is a very important distinction, because evasion is illegal, while avoidance is an undesirable and unintended use of Parliament’s legislation. In drawing that distinction and correcting the record to say “avoidance”, the Chancellor has made an important concession.

**Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con):** My hon. Friend is making an interesting speech, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. As a former personal finance editor before entering this place, I used to have many inquiries from readers about these schemes as they were offered to them. My advice was always, “Steer clear, because eventually the price will be paid.” Does he agree that there is a role for regulators to look at the poor and potentially dangerous advice given by accountants about these schemes?

**Mr Baker:** It is my intention in my concluding remarks to stridently condemn the promoters of these schemes, who have ended up luring people into misery through what they have done.

Before closing with this letter, I want to mention that the Chancellor also wrote:

> “It is not normal, or indeed reasonable, to be paid in loans that are not repaid in practice. It is not fair to the vast majority of taxpayers who pay their taxes in full and on time for anyone to benefit from contrived avoidance of this sort and that is why this government has legislated the charge on DR loans.”

I agree with the Chancellor that it is not normal or reasonable, but I make it very clear that I place the blame on the promoters of these schemes.

HMRC initially expected 40,000 people to be affected, although in a recent parliamentary question, my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury gave a new figure of 50,000. HMRC’s impact note stated:

> “The government anticipates that some of these individuals will become insolvent as a result.”

The Loan Charge Action Group suggests that the loan charge will end up affecting probably upwards of 100,000 people and their families.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) has tabled an EDM criticising the measure, arguing that “retrospectively taxing something that was technically allowed at the time, is unfair.”

Of course, I would agree. HMRC has argued that the loan charge is a new tax on a new source, and described it as retroactive rather than retrospective. I would like the Minister, if he can, to explain both terms and any difference that the Treasury is implying.

**Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD):** The hon. Gentleman deserves a lot of credit for bringing this issue to the House. Does he agree that we should be working cross-party ahead of the Report stage of this year’s Finance Bill to put together a new clause that deals with the problem, under which any loan charge would come into effect only after Royal Assent of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017?

**Mr Baker:** I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman that there is a job of work to be done across parties to uphold the rule of law, in particular the principle that legislation should not apply retrospectively. That is a subject on which I have made speeches over the years.

We end up in a hideous cycle of undesired action, in particular to avoid taxation, followed by the injustice of retrospective action to protect other taxpayers and the misery that causes to large numbers of people. It must be brought to an end, but underpinning that we must be committed to the rule of law.

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the Chamber. Can I ask him about retrospection? My constituent, Alan Williams FCA, points out that HMRC already had sufficient power to recover tax from individuals, so it is rather its own convenience and its unwillingness to apply its existing powers that have led to this legislation. My constituent Andy Pocock points out that in his case, he has procedures under the existing legislation whereby he is allowed to appeal, but all that will be cut off retrospectively by the new legislation and he will not have a chance to fight and defend his corner.

**Mr Baker:** One of Parliament’s duties is to restrain the Executive and ensure that their powers are reasonable. We should look carefully at the subject that my right hon. Friend has just raised. It is important that HMRC treats people in a decent and civilised way, and certainly more powers ought not to be taken than are strictly necessary.

**Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con):** My hon. Friend is to be congratulated on securing a debate on this subject. One of the iniquities, in addition to the issue of retrospectivity, is that at least four of the constituents who have been to see me have said that they were told by their companies that unless they signed these new forms of contractual relationships, they would not continue to work for those companies. Given that, should not HMRC be pursuing the companies and not the individuals?

**Mr Baker:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time and I thank him for securing this debate. On that last point, my constituent was a civil servant for 37 years. In 2010, his team was TUPE-ed from the Ministry of Defence to Hewlett-Packard. He retired in 2013. In 2014, they asked him back to oversee financial arrangements it certainly should share the responsibility for what they did.

**Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Baker:** I will take one or two more interventions, and then I will move on. It is not quite like being a Minister, but very nearly.

**Teresa Pearce:** The hon. Gentleman is being very generous with his time and I thank him for securing this debate. On that last point, my constituent was a civil servant for 37 years. In 2010, his team was TUPE-ed from the Ministry of Defence to Hewlett-Packard. He retired in 2013. In 2014, they asked him back to oversee a Ministry of Defence contract, but refused to take him back on pay-as-you-earn and said they would only do it through one of these vehicles. Should my constituent not have had some comfort from the fact that this was an MOD contract? Surely the Government and Government Departments should look at who they are contracting with, to ensure that a man such as this, in his retirement years, is not stung by this charge.
Mr Baker: I obviously cannot comment on individual circumstances. However, this is a good opportunity to draw a distinction between taking people on as contractors and insisting that they join schemes that could end up with their using disguised remuneration arrangements. On the one hand, contracting is a legitimate way of going about business; on the other, engaging in disguised remuneration schemes—an aggressive form of tax avoidance—is not desirable.

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend is doing a sterling job of raising this matter in this place. On that basis, will he challenge the Minister on how many firms have been investigated, how many promoters have been pursued and prosecuted, and how many of those had some connection to Government contracts or payments?

Mr Baker: I join my right hon. Friend’s call for the Minister to set that out, which my hon. Friend the Minister will have heard. I will now make some progress.

The Loan Charge Action Group says that the human impact of receiving a bill for up to 10 years’ worth of tax will have a catastrophic effect on individuals and their families. On whom among us would it not have a catastrophic effect? It goes on to say that we are looking at thousands of bankruptcies, family break-ups and suicide attempts, as well as mental illness, unemployment, loss of abode and more. That is a catalogue of human suffering and misery.

HMRC’s impact assessment of the measure says: “This package is not expected to have a material impact on family formation, stability or breakdown.”

However, that looks at aggregates, not the impact on individuals, which it seems to me is a common mistake of Government. As a Conservative, I wish to focus first and foremost on the individual, not the collective.

I will foreshorten my remarks, given the interventions I have taken. One specific complaint is the lack of warning. A freedom of information request revealed that HMRC has issued about 23,000 loan charge awareness letters, which were only issued from the second quarter of 2018. HMRC says that 50,000 individuals may be affected, so many will be unaware of the impending charge. The Loan Charge Action Group points out that the opportunities to settle new tax affairs with HMRC ahead of the charge were similarly not widely publicised, nor was the deadline of 31 May 2018, leaving people in a terrible fix, although I understand that the deadline has been quietly dropped.

The Loan Charge Action Group suggests that historical users of schemes who left many years ago are probably completely ignorant of this new legislation and will only hear of it after receiving a large bill some time in 2020. This is a dreadful risk, which the Government should forestall.

I am keen to conclude, so I will come to some solutions that I ask the Minister to consider. As I outlined in a letter to the Chancellor in September, there should be clarity about what DOTAS—disclosure of tax avoidance schemes—registration means. There should be a legally mandated text accompanying every advertisement of a DOTAS-registered scheme that explains that the purpose of registration is to enable HMRC to identify tax liabilities and to recover them when such schemes are proven not to work. It does not imply any kind of legitimacy, and registration with HMRC is not for the purpose of endorsing the schemes. When HMRC becomes aware that a taxpayer has subscribed to a DOTAS-registered scheme, it should contact the taxpayer and make them aware that registration has the purpose of enforcement and does not convey legitimacy. HMRC must take into account people’s circumstances, and the threat of insolvency should never be used as a kind of extrajudicial punishment.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): On treating individuals fairly, it is pretty evident that the people who have been selling these questionable products are not being pursued in the way that they should be. In view of that, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should start looking at mitigation, so that certain individuals—I know of a couple in my constituency—are not bankrupted by this whole sorry affair?

Mr Baker: The Minister will have heard my hon. Friend’s point, which I endorse.

The loan charge should apply from Royal Assent onwards. In other words, it should be prospective—a case I have made many times—not retroactive or retrospective. HMRC should be more proactive in advising that such schemes are likely to end in tax charges in the future, and perhaps far into the future. More steps should be taken against promoters and introducers of such schemes. They are the ones profiting from this misery. Finally, the issue of employment status and IR35 requires action at last, to bring the uncertainty to an end.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): My hon. Friend wants further action taken against the promoters of these schemes. Does he agree that we also need to take action against the Queen’s counsel who peddled rinky-dink advice that encouraged many of our constituents—including some of mine—to participate in these schemes, in the belief that a QC’s opinion rendered them beyond the reach of HMRC?

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I hesitate to trespass far beyond my expertise, but I make the point that it is often thought that the opinion of a QC determines the truth. That is not the case. QCs and barristers argue among themselves in court, and the court determines the facts. I am often struck by people relying on the opinions of lawyers when what they actually need is the judgment of a court.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On the judgment of courts, does my hon. Friend share my concern that individuals are sometimes effectively left without a remedy, because the person who gave them that advice so many years ago no longer continues to trade? There is then effectively no remedy for the individual and no ability for them to claw back their significant losses.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In concluding my remarks, I shall allow what he says to stand.

I really think that it is perfectly natural for people to want to pay less tax, but I would be failing in my duty if I did not say to all those paying attention to the debate that, when something seems too good to be true, it probably is. We ought not ever to allow ourselves to be
lured into schemes that offer absurdly low rates of tax. However, I save my strident condemnation for the promoters of these schemes, who, in their advertisements, seek to persuade people that this is legitimate activity and to create the impression that DOTAS registration conveys some kind of legitimacy or endorsement by the state.

That is an outrage, because of course it encourages people to participate. These promoters are, frankly, wicked. It is a great evil to encourage people into these schemes and to leave them in misery afterwards.

Finally, we must insist on the rule of law. Notwithstanding the wicked conduct of promoters, the greater wickedness in the end is to undermine the rule of law—the certainty that comes from someone knowing that if their actions were lawful at the time they were carried out, they will not subsequently be challenged through retrospective legislation. I feel most strongly about that, as I have throughout my time in Parliament. I urge the Government, whatever evils have been done by the promoters of these schemes, to abandon the practice of retrospective legislation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): A number of colleagues wish to speak. If colleagues can restrict themselves to speaking for no more than five minutes each, I will not put a timer on. However, if colleagues go over five minutes, I will have to start reducing other colleagues’ time.

2.47 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On behalf of all Members here, I congratulate the Loan Charge Action Group on its effective lobbying of so many MPs. I would not wish its members to think that this number of MPs normally turn up to such a debate. It has done very well and has clearly done its members proud.

I start by emphasising that I cannot defend tax avoidance in any form. I strongly believe that everyone should pay their fair share and that there should be repercussions for those who do not. However, the case at hand is not quite so simple. This loan charge will affect up to 100,000 people, many of whom acted in good faith and were acutely unaware that they were ever doing anything wrong. Several of those impacted were forced into schemes as prerequisites of taking up a job, following guidance given in good faith, rather than attempting to avoid their tax responsibility. They are being taxed retrospectively for something that was technically allowed at the time.

What is more, the proposed 20-year range is usually reserved for blatant acts of criminality. We are talking about life-changing amounts of money. For some people, the sums involved run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. This will lead to bankruptcy. This will lead to mental breakdown. This will lead, and has led, to suicide. I will quote directly from the letters and emails sent to me by my constituents, so that the Minister can hear the reality behind these excessive measures.

Mr M argues that governing with life-changing force and 20 years in the past is nothing short of grossly unfair, and that it sets a dangerous precedent that HMRC can, where it suits its need, change or create laws and retroactively and aggressively enforce them.

Mr C says that bankruptcy is his only option. He says that he took and followed professional advice and declared his arrangements at the time to HMRC, which did not act. Mr L describes the impact of the stress levels on his health since he was made aware of the legislation, particularly as he believed the scheme to be legitimate. He claims that these schemes are still freely available for contractors to sign up to.

My constituents are not alone. The Loan Charge Action Group has conducted analysis of those affected. It highlights the fact that 68% describe depression, 71% fear bankruptcy, 31% fear relationship breakdown and 39% have suicidal thoughts. The policy will cost lives.

Would it not be more sensible for HMRC to pursue the enablers of the schemes? I am talking about the client organisations, agencies and umbrella companies, all of which have benefited and which, I believe, hold the most responsibility. Perhaps HMRC does not do that because even HMRC itself was using and paying contracts now subject to the loan charge, working through arrangements that HMRC now declares to be tax avoidance schemes.

Let me re-emphasise that if and when an individual or organisation has purposely dodged tax, they must be penalised. But what strikes me is that HMRC is ruthlessly pursuing hard-working contractors, while rolling over in the face of obvious and aggressive tax avoidance by so many of the UK’s largest corporations. Why did Amazon pay just £1.7 million in taxes last year, despite profits almost trebling to £72.3 million? Why did Facebook pay just £15.8 million in taxes last year, despite collecting a record £1.3 billion in British sales? Why did Google pay just £49 million on UK sales of £7.6 billion? Richard Murphy, a professor of practice in international political economy, estimates that such tax avoidance costs the UK about £7 billion each year. That is enough to pay for 180,000 nurses or 150,000 secondary school teachers.

Tax avoidance in any form must not be tolerated. While the Government bankrupt unknowing individuals across the country, multibillion-pound corporations make a laughing stock of their tax collection efforts. It is high time that those organisations and those who have enabled the schemes described today were made to pay their fair share once and for all.

2.53 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on securing this debate, which gives us the opportunity to highlight the devastating impact that the 2019 loan charge is having on many individuals.

My constituent who has been affected by the loan charge is at his wits’ end. His family life has been turned upside down and, as he sees it, he has no alternative but to declare himself bankrupt. He is not a wealthy man. He is not a professional footballer; he is an IT contractor. When he and others were made redundant by BT, they were introduced to financial advisers who set up these schemes for them. He and they acted in good faith, only following the advice given so as to be IR35 compliant.
I want to highlight two issues. My first concern is that HMRC is pursuing the easy targets—individuals who have acted in good faith, are not well off and do not have their own bespoke financial advisers and accountants. My understanding is that the Glasgow Rangers Football Club case, on which the 2019 loan charge is based, concluded, that the tax liability fell on the employers. That raises the question why HMRC is not pursuing the client organisations, agencies and umbrella groups that have benefited significantly from setting up these arrangements.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend’s focus on the individuals involved. Does he agree that the retrospective nature of the measure is not just a matter for the rule of law in the abstract, but that it undermines the trust of those people and their families and communities in our Government and our legal system, and will do so for generations to come?

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention—he has a crystal ball, because he has foretold the next item in my speech.

The people affected have become a target. They are vulnerable people. They are not well paid and do not receive many of the benefits and protections that payroll employees do: sick pay, holiday pay and maternity and paternity leave. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister could advise us when he sums up the debate of whether the impact assessment has looked at the personal circumstances of the individuals who are being pursued, whether they are able to pay and what the impact will be on their lives.

My second point, which my hon. Friend for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) foretold, is that the basis on which the 2019 loan charge has been introduced and many individuals are now being pursued is that it is retrospective. It undermines the cornerstone of taxation, which is that a Government should not seek to impose or increase a tax charge on income earned, gains realised or transactions concluded at a time before the legislation was announced.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Peter Aldous: I sense that I should plough on, Mr Walker, so as to give others an opportunity to make a speech.

It is vital that any taxation system is equitable and progressive, and that those with the broadest shoulders pay their fair share.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I will not hold it against the hon. Gentleman if he would like to be generous to Mr Goldsmith.

Peter Aldous: Then I will allow my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) to intervene before I continue.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and you, Mr Walker, for intervening in such a magnanimous way.

It is not just right hon. and hon. Members in this Chamber who take the view that my hon. Friend has just expressed in relation to retrospective taxation. The current Chancellor of the Exchequer said in 2005:

“A taxpayer...is entitled to be protected from retrospective or retrospective legislation.”—[Official Report, 7 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 1139.]

And of course he was right. The measure that we are seeing and debating today is retrospective taxation, and it is abhorrent.

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention: he reinforces what is the fundamental, fatal flaw of this injustice. What I and, I believe, all hon. Members in the Chamber are concerned about is that a group of people—often vulnerable people—who have acted in good faith are now being asked to bear an excessive burden, which will have a devastating impact on their lives and their families’ lives. For that reason, it is very important that we air these concerns to the Minister.

2.57 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). I offer my congratulations to the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on setting up this important debate. I, too, am grateful to the Loan Charge Action Group for its briefing and, in particular, to our former colleague in the House, Greg Mulholland, for his assistance in preparing for the debate.

A number of constituents have contacted me about this issue, and I will focus on the questions that they wish me to put to the Minister at the end of my remarks. I will make a few comments beforehand, though, first on the numbers of people affected, which seem to be in dispute. There has already been mention of several figures: 40,000, 50,000 and 100,000. If I read the Library briefing correctly, Mr David Richardson, director of customer strategy at HMRC, said to the Treasury Committee that there were 105,000 cases, 80,000 of which were unresolved. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify exactly what the numbers are.

The second issue is the jobs that some of the victims have. The Loan Charge Action Group says:

“The Loan Charge affects many tens of thousands of professionals—contractors, freelancers, agency workers including social workers, supply teachers, locum nurses and doctors who were recommended to use umbrella companies by employers, professional advisers and employment agencies.

For many people the sums involved run into hundreds of thousands of pounds”.

The group goes on to say:

“Schemes were, and still are, legal and in most cases the motivation behind their use was not to reduce tax but simply to comply with the poorly drafted IR 35 legislation, which”, 18 years on, “remains unclear.” It is misunderstood, and certainly the origin of this issue does seem to be the IR 35 regulations. I have been dealing with cases for constituents about that for the past 18 years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhan McDonagh) made reference, as did the hon. Member for Wycombe, to the Loan Charge Action Group’s analysis of the impact. She quoted the figures about those who are affected. Some 68% were affected by depression or mental impact, 71% by bankruptcy, 49% by loss of resident home, 30% by divorce and relationship breakdown, 30% by loss of career, and 39% by suicide or self-harm thoughts. The biggest issue for all my constituents and the action group is the retrospective
nature of the legislation, which the hon. Member for Wycombe focused on. That has been raised many times already, and the key question remains about the transparent unfairness of this decision.

My constituents have requested that I put a number of questions to the Minister. I recognise that he is not directly responsible for this policy, but I am sure he has a briefing that will cover at least some of the questions that my constituents have asked me to raise, because they are quite predictable.

Why did it take HMRC 20 years to take official action? Why did HMRC not email or write to loan users over the past 20 years, to ask them to come out of these schemes and the associated risks, when it had the relevant information on the yearly individual self-assessment tax returns? Why ask for 20 years’ retrospective payment for something that was and is legal? Why has an appeal format been refused to loan scheme users, leaving costly judicial review as the only alternative, which single individuals cannot afford by themselves?

Why cannot HMRC just admit that it did not perform due diligence on the loan schemes? Why, when public sector contractors were asked to move into IR35 in 2018 so that they could pay the right amount of tax, did they not get retroactive tax to pay? Why did PricewaterhouseCoopers get away with 35% early discount on a £10 million fine in 2017 for a failed BHS audit? Apart from going bankrupt or committing suicide, how does HMRC expect most individuals to be able to repay such sums at short notice?

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden also mentioned a letter the action group received saying that HMRC contractors are now being pursued by HMRC due to the loan charge. The Loan Charge Action Group has now discovered that HMRC itself was using and paying contractors who are now subject to the loan charge. The LCAG has been contacted by people in that situation reporting that they are working on important IT projects for HMRC, were security-cleared by HMRC, and were working through arrangements that HMRC has now declared to be tax avoidance schemes. In effect, that means that HMRC was itself involved in arrangements that it now says “never worked.”

The action group commented:

“This turns this from fiasco into farce.”

Perhaps the Minister could comment on that.

More than 100 colleagues have signed the early-day motion. This is clearly an issue that the Government have to address. There is a massive impact on the lives of those affected, including my constituents. They look to HMRC for fairness, and I trust that the Minister’s response will indicate that that is a possibility. If it is not, I look forward to a cross-party, Back-Bench new clause to the Finance Bill, which, based on the numbers here today, would stand a good chance of passing through the House.

3.3 pm

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Walker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on introducing the debate and being such a champion on this issue. My inbox and my surgeries have been inundated.

I represent Aberdeen South, which is the energy capital of Europe and the hub of our oil and gas industry. Many who worked in oil and gas were actively encouraged by their companies to get involved with such schemes, to set up a personal limited company and to get off the company books. Many did so for many years. Many felt assured that they were being advised by chartered accountants and tax advisers. Everything was above board. It was their belief that their professional accountant could not advise anything illegal; otherwise, their chartered status would be revoked.

Adam Holloway (Gravesend) (Con): Of course it is a failure of successive Governments, but in 2011 the Government actually looked at this. They did not come up with a definitive answer and as a result these schemes proliferated.

Ross Thomson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I could not agree with him more. For many, this option seemed to be the obvious choice. The retrospective nature of this decision is causing great distress. As has been said, there is a huge human cost. I want to take this opportunity to share with the Minister and hon. Members the stories of my constituents.

One constituent wrote to me and said:

“It’s been going on for a few years now and taking its toll on my family. As we are unsure where we’ll get the money to pay any outstanding tax, their bullying tactics in getting you to sign up to pay and the fact they demand you to reach a settlement with them, even though when we have done everything they ask, they have still not come back with any settlement figures.

Not only that, they are saying even if you settle or pay back the loans, there’s a strong possibility it won’t end there, so we go back to their scaremongering tactics they’ve deployed for you to pay up front and ask questions later, it’s totally unjust for our future as being a democratic society”.

Another constituent said:

“I like to think I understood the risk I was taking and had every confidence in the scheme I was using. I did not entertain the prospect that the Government would be prepared to violate the core principle of the rule of ‘legal certainty’ by introducing retrospective legislation going back 20 years…This weekend I have received my settlement ‘offer’ under HMRC’s settlement offer and am currently in the process of deciding whether or not to accept their terms. Whilst I sincerely would like to settle and move on, I am deeply concerned that their CLSO2 is extremely unfair and punitive.”

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Does he agree that the fundamental unfairness is that HMRC is going after the easiest of targets, namely the individuals, rather than those who may be the most culpable?

Ross Thomson: I could not agree more. It seems to be easy pickings for HMRC. It is not going after those who are truly culpable. That is why such great distress is being expressed in our surgeries.

My constituent continued:

“This whole sorry affair has imposed life changing levels of stress on both me and my family, especially with the backdrop of the recent downturn in the oil and gas industry where I have been out of work for about 50% of the past two years.”

Another constituent wrote:

“This is a complicated situation, however fundamentally, HMRC have closed down the opportunity to use these ‘loan’ schemes.”

My constituent accepts that it is a positive move to end ambiguity.
"The retrospective nature of this legislation is going to place a large number of contractors under extreme financial duress. Bearing in mind HMRC’s failure to sort this situation out sooner”. Another constituent—this is the last example I will give—emailed me to say that he was emailed by a company stating that he could retain 78% to 80% of his salary legally. He wrote:

“The scheme was QC approved and top counsel advised it was sound… I learnt during the latter part of last week that my retrospective tax charge is very likely to exceed £230,000. As for HMRC’s so-called ‘Impact Assessment’ apparently finding that such sums would lead to few, if any issues for those being expected to pay such, I can only comment that they must assume that we are all multi-millionaires. Of course, they know full well that we aren’t.

It’s very daunting when the full weight of government makes demands with threats of the law being brought to bear when, according to the law, no law has been broken. I doubt very much that I can simply ignore threats, be taken to court and stand there and say such. Thus individuals are placed in the position of hiring lawyers with costs running into six-figures and this will be beyond the means of most, if not all of us.”

This particular constituent says that he is single and has “never had a second income from a partner to assist with cost of living”.

He is facing serious financial distress.

It is right that we condemn those who sold on and encouraged such schemes. It is deeply unfair that we seek to do this retrospectively. It absolutely violates the core principles of the rule of law. I could not agree more with colleagues who have already expressed that frustration. I think that this particular measure is disgraceful. I will go further—I think it is dishonourable and should be stopped.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): If colleagues could keep to five minutes, we might get everybody in.

3.9 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): This House has the chance and the opportunity to put this wrong right. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said at the end of his speech, there will be a Report stage to the current Finance Bill. It will come to the Floor of the House and we—every Member here today of whatever party, whoever signed the early-day motion—have the power to come together, cross-party, and pass a new clause to right this wrong. Frankly, words in a Westminster Hall debate and signatures on an EDM mean nothing unless we are prepared to go through the Lobby to vote this tyrannous legislation down. Constituents, the Loan Charge Action Group and all the people affected will expect their Members of Parliament to vote and act and not simply talk. Today gives us a platform to make sure we send a powerful message to Treasury Ministers that this is a catalyst for the action that was not taken two years ago, but will be taken, I believe, when we get to the Report stage of the Finance Bill.

As has been said by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), there is a fundamental principle here that he and I can agree on: the rule of law. When we talk about British values, about which he and I agree, the rule of law is something the Department for Education says should be taught in every school up and down our country. Well, this is the test. Either Members of Parliament believe in the rule of law and what our children are taught, or they do not. When we vote on the new clause in the Finance Bill, as I am sure we will be asked to, we will see whether we really do believe in the rule of law.

Mr Baker: As one liberal to another, it is a delight to agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I hope members of the public will not think I am engaging in too much levity if I say that some of us are engaged in enough rebellion already. I should be very grateful indeed if the Government tabled their own amendment to deal with this matter, so that we do not find ourselves engaged in any sort of rebellion on the Finance Bill.

Sir Edward Davey: It was a pleasure to allow that intervention. I have no objection to the way in which the wrong is righted, as long as it is righted properly. If we stick to the principle of the rule of law, as I said in my intervention on the hon. Gentleman, ending retrospection in this tax change means that any charge prior to Royal Assent of the Finance (No. 2) Act 2017 must end. There can be no charges before Royal Assent of that Act; otherwise we are in the area of retrospection.

Like other colleagues, I have had constituents contacting me. Sixteen have contacted me directly, and in my experience that means there are many more out there who have not contacted me. I will read from just one, from Mr Garry Taylor, who talks about the “devastating consequences” that will destroy the finances of “me and my family”. I do not know about other colleagues, but I have had people almost in tears in my surgery over a tax matter, which has never happened before in 20 years.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that people are living in genuine fear of bankruptcy and losing their homes, and it is not acceptable that the Government have handled the matter in that way?

Sir Edward Davey: I could not agree more. I have never seen people so distressed and distraught by one particular measure, which appears to target pain on just a few people. Those people work hard in our NHS, our industry, our schools and our civil service. Why do the Government want to target so much pain on so relatively few people? The charges involved are massive: hundreds of thousands of pounds. It is completely iniquitous. I believe the Minister knows that and I hope he will therefore put it right. Everyone in this House is clearly against tax scams; we want to close them down, but as the right hon. Gentleman said today, ending retrospection can be no charges before Royal Assent of that Act; otherwise we are in the area of retrospection.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Davey: I will in a second.

I might be the only veteran of the 1999 Finance Bill Standing Committee. I am happy for colleagues to correct me, but in those early days of my parliamentary career, I had the pleasure of sitting on nine consecutive Finance Bills that dealt with the early history of IR35. We had huge arguments then that that was wrong.
[Sir Edward Davey]

There is an inherent issue that needs to be tackled, but what is proposed is absolutely not the way. HMRC has got to learn from history. It appears to me to be acting vindictively because it did not get its way a few years ago on IR35. Because people found legitimate ways around it, it is coming back and acting in an outrageously draconian way, and this House has to say no.

3.15 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I must begin with a little grovelling and apologise in advance for having to leave this debate for a Statutory Instrument Committee. I am grateful to you for allowing me to speak, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who secured this debate. It is of great importance not only to my constituents, but to those of many other hon. Members.

My constituents are concerned about the 2019 loan charge. They have tended to work as contractors or freelancers in the IT and professional services sphere, and they are now deeply concerned that HMRC’s actions over the loan charge will place them in serious financial hardship, if not outright bankruptcy. They suggest to me that they were encouraged by professional advisers or the contracting companies themselves to enter special payment schemes, which were deemed legal and allowed for scheme users to be paid in the form of a loan rather than ordinary remuneration. Resulting from poorly drafted IR35 legislation, such schemes are now deemed by HMRC to be disguised remuneration that amounts to aggressive tax avoidance. HMRC is pursuing affected constituents at a time when many cannot easily recover their earnings.

My constituents fear that this action represents retrospective taxation, thereby undermining legal certainty and confidence in the tax system. They are also angry that the charge is being levied on contracting employees, despite a legal case involving Rangers, which judged the employer liable for any unpaid tax and national insurance. Given that for nearly two decades HMRC appeared to permit tax advisers and accountants to recommend the schemes without penalty, my constituents believe they have been let down by a system that should have alerted them to problems in a timely manner.

I have had a one-to-one meeting with the Financial Secretary on this issue in which he set out the Government’s position with clarity. I understand that scheme users will now be able to spread any payments to HMRC over five years should their taxable income this year be under £50,000. However, my constituents want to know why HMRC is not apparently being more robust in pursuing affected companies to employ people without collecting NICs, despite a legal case involving Rangers, which judged the employer liable for any unpaid tax and national insurance. When people were engaged on very different terms to permanent employees, it was not clear whether they were subject to IR35. In that grey area, third-party scheme providers began to offer a service whereby contractors became employees of a third-party company, which was then engaged by the agency or client company. Remuneration was paid in the form of loans, which were often made by an offshore third party.

Those arrangements were marketed as HMRC-compliant and seemed to offer the certainty that many were looking for. The Government now claim that the arrangements did not work and, although they were within the law, were not in tune with what Parliament intended. That has led to a series of measures designed to recover the funds, which were not originally deemed taxable, in spite of the fact that the people affected legitimately completed tax returns, paid their dues and disclosed the arrangements to HMRC.

Many within the schemes have yet to be informed of the amount that they are due to pay, including my constituent Nick, who was involved in one of them. To say that Nick is worried about that is an understatement. I have met him, and he said that he is...
“facing personal ruin, most likely bankruptcy with the loss of the family home”.

He feels that that will affect him and his family. He continued:

“While I have recently moved out of financial services...bankruptcy would make me ineligible to work for any financial services company again therefore severely limiting my potential employers” and employment. To say that causes a great deal of stress is an understatement. Although he is grateful to have the support of his wife and family, there are days when he feels hopelessly overwhelmed by that looming over him.

Given the vast sums of money involved, and the various reasons and backgrounds behind people becoming involved in such schemes, we need a sense of the role of the companies who provided the contracts. They clearly played a role. I would also like to know from the Minister whether the time-to-pay arrangements will provide the people affected with any kind of practical support.

3.21 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) made it clear that the genesis of the matter was the change to IR35 in 2000, which led to many freelance, contracted and itinerant workers ordering their financial affairs, notably for the purpose of paying tax, in a way that they believed and were told was completely proper and in line with the new regulatory environment. Subsequently, umbrella schemes developed as some of those people’s tax and financial affairs led them to the point where they became liable for employer’s national insurance contributions. Those umbrella schemes have become mainstream in the subsequent 18 years.

The people concerned were largely acting in good faith, whether or not the people who were advising and promoting the schemes were. The architects and advocates of the schemes are the people who the Treasury should be pursuing with vigour and determination.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Tommy Sheppard: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hayes: I happily give way to my hon. Friend first.

Fiona Bruce: Is my right hon. Friend aware that many of the organisations and advisers that encouraged our constituents, who are now suffering so much grief, to go into the schemes are the same ones putting themselves forward to give our constituents advice to address the challenges from HMRC? Does that not add insult to injury?

Mr Hayes: That should be a further part of the invitation that I made via my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), whom I congratulate on securing the debate, to the Minister. We look forward to the Minister confirming that when he responds.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Hayes: I will briefly, but I want to move on, because I appreciate the lack of time.

Tommy Sheppard: I am grateful, because I concur entirely with the point that the real villains are the companies that mis-sold the schemes in the first place—at times, for fees that can only be considered usurious. My constituent paid £138,000 in fees over three years to a company called AM Limited, which has changed its name but is still trading and registered in Panama. If HMRC were to assist my constituent in trying to recover that money, he would be much better able to pay his retrospective tax liability.

Mr Hayes: I have answered many debates in this Chamber as a Minister of various Departments, and I tell the Minister, who is a good and honourable man, that when this many hon. Members from both sides of the House come together in a single cause, he had better take action. The writing is on the wall and he has to respond. I know he will take that piece of sound advice in the spirit that it is offered to him.

I will briefly make three recommendations and then draw my remarks to a rapid conclusion. First, I would like the Minister to tell us what further impact assessment has been made by scale and detail on the families affected by the measures. Secondly, I would like him to give us an estimate of how many people who cannot or will not pay will be driven to bankruptcy, and what effect that will have on the Treasury’s revenue calculations on the matter. Thirdly, as I have already said twice—I make no apology for amplifying it—I would like him to tell us what steps he is taking in respect of the architects and advocates of the schemes, who have done so much damage.

I have no doubt that being a Treasury Minister is about churning figures, but it is also about changing lives. This matter affects the wellbeing of large numbers of our constituents. Families will be blighted and faith in fairness will be ruined. The Minister—an honourable gentleman, a good Treasury Minister, a valued colleague and friend—needs to see the writing on the wall and take action. Woe betide those who do not. They will rue the day that they failed to listen to the voices that have been aired today.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I thank Mr Hayes for his generous and succinct contribution. Last but not least, I call Justin Madders.

3.26 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on securing the debate. It is clear from what we have heard that the issue has caused much consternation and anguish for many people, so it is right that those concerns have been aired here.

As much as the next person, I believe that if tax is due, it should be collected. Without the ability to raise funds, our public services would grind to a halt. I am sure there is unanimous agreement about that. My concern, and that of many hon. Members, lies in the way the recovery of the 2019 loan charge has been handled. It raises questions about whether HMRC can say, hand on heart, that all those who are subject to it have had what I would call a fair hearing. I want to make it absolutely clear that if, following due process, the money is owed, it should be paid, but what I have heard from a constituent does not give me confidence that that will be the case.
My constituent, Mr Crook, was working as a geologist in the oil industry when the agreements that are being scrutinised were set up. His work has dried up and he is now unemployed. He tells me that he is not in a position to repay everything he owes—not that he has been told how much that is—and that because of the uncertainty and the failure of HMRC to engage with him, he is concerned about the risk of bankruptcy.

I have corresponded with Ministers and officials to ask someone to look into Mr Crook’s case but I have had nothing back but the standard response. With Mr Crook understandably anxious to resolve matters, he has contacted HMRC at the email address provided on 9 April, 8 May, 30 August, 31 August and 28 September, and by post on 2 July. His emails have had an automated response and he has had no response to his letter at all.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument on his constituent’s behalf. I have a constituent much like his who has been told that he may have to pay back more than £100,000 over the five years, which could cost him £2,500 a month. Does my hon. Friend accept that even when people are still in work, if they are trying to provide for their families, those sorts of sums are simply unobtainable for most of our constituents and to provide for their families, those sorts of sums are than £100,000 over the five years, which could cost him

My constituent tells me that although he submitted his tax returns each year when he was working they were never queried, and because of that HMRC has at the very least implicitly, if not explicitly, accepted that the moneys he received as a loan were indeed just that. He is concerned by the retrospective nature and long reach of the loan charge, and states:

“We really are normal people, who operated within the law at the time, itemising everything on our tax returns, paying benefits in kind tax on the loans and operating under a registered scheme with a reference number lodged with HMRC at the time.”

I contrast those words with what my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) said earlier about the string of multinational companies that are clearly paying less tax than they ought. When individuals are being driven to despair by the sort of hectoring we have heard about, it is perhaps right if they conclude that there seems to be one rule for the big corporations and another rule for the man on the street. If individuals are made bankrupt we will all lose, but it looks as if we could end up in that situation by default because of a lack of resources and engagement by HMRC. Will the Minister look carefully at how the recovery operation is working, so that we avoid that? Finally, I ask that HMRC acts with competence and compassion.

Justin Madders: There is a lack of reality and a lack of genuine engagement with the individuals affected. As I said, my constituent has not had a discussion of the sort that my hon. Friend refers to, and until he does, he is in no position to know whether he will be able to repay anything at all. Will there be genuine discussions before the loan charges become due? Is the Minister confident that the Department has sufficient staff and resources to deal with all the inquiries that we have heard about?

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Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate being called in this debate, Mr Walker, and I thank the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for securing it. In previous years, the SNP has raised concerns about the implementation of IR35 legislation, and during discussions on the Finance Bill I suggested a review into the way that it was being implemented. It was not necessarily that the legislation was a bad idea, but the way it was implemented did not work for people because they could not navigate the system appropriately. I raised that issue in 2016, just as my colleagues did previously.

I have been approached by many constituents about the loan charge. Some were recommended to join these schemes by the companies they worked for, which wanted them to move on and become contractors. One person told me that a presentation was given in the company’s boardroom by another company running one of the schemes. Individuals were encouraged to go to that presentation and transfer into one of the schemes rather than being employees of the company. That is a real concern.

I am concerned about the way that this measure is being implemented. I have a constituent who filled in his details before 30 September, as he was requested to do, but has not yet received a settlement figure from HMRC. Another constituent in the same boat has been told that they will receive a settlement figure by 5 April next year, although the Treasury promised that those figures would arrive by 30 November this year. People are being told that the settlement figures will not be calculated until 5 April, but they have also been told that they will need a payment plan in place by then in order to be compliant. If that settlement figure is not calculated until April and the payment plan will be required immediately, people do not have enough time to make the decisions they need to make on any settlement figure.

Clarity about timelines would be hugely appreciated. This has been a moveable feast, and the Treasury and HMRC have regularly changed the dates and times by which people have been required to submit information. It is important to have clarity so that people know when they need to have a payment plan in place.

It is important that people pay the tax they owe. At least one of my constituents is disputing the calculation made by HMRC. They have not been given a breakdown of the calculation and cannot work out why HMRC has come to that figure. There needs to be transparency so that people understand why HMRC thinks they owe what it says they owe, and they can then make rational and reasonable decisions about payment plans.

I have been clear with any constituent who has approached me, and with HMRC, that we need a mutually beneficial payment arrangement. We cannot have people being made bankrupt as a result of these payments. The change from 12 months to a five-year period for repayments is welcome, but if someone is being asked to pay back hundreds of thousands of pounds when they are existing on jobseeker’s allowance, it is not possible to pay that money back over five years.

I am also concerned about individuals who are being asked to sell or move out of their family home and have it repossessed. That causes problems for local councils as well as for the family involved, and just passes the buck. If HMRC wants to recoup the money, it would be sensible to do that in a way that means people can pay...
it, rather than having to be made bankrupt. We need give and take by HMRC, as well as transparency and clarity about dates.

**Drew Hendry:** Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest problems facing people in this position is the uncertainty of not knowing how they will cope with paying these large amounts back over a period of time, when no assistance or guidance has been provided as to how they might make those payments?

**Kirsty Blackman:** As I said, this has been an incredibly moveable feast and HMRC keeps moving the goalposts. It is important to have clarity about the future timeline. Constituents need to understand what they will need to pay back, the timescale involved, and why they are being asked to pay back the amount requested.

3.35 pm

**Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. Today we have heard some awful stories from my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and others, and I am grateful to everybody who has contributed to the debate and put the case so clearly.

There is no doubt that small business owners, contractors and others who have used these schemes will be significantly affected by the charge next year. Many are not wealthy people. They did not intend to avoid tax, and until recently many were not aware that there was even an issue. In some cases, the schemes were presented by agencies or employers as part of a standard contract. Some people could lose their livelihoods; some could lose their homes. The schemes we are talking about are a form of tax avoidance, and it is right that tax owed is collected. Avoidance should not pay—that is the principle. However, those who will be negatively affected by these schemes deserve our empathy and understanding, and many of the stories we have heard confirm that some of those affected are vulnerable and became caught up in these schemes without initially comprehending what they were all about.

If what is being reported is correct, it is an absolute disgrace that hospital cleaners, locum doctors, nurses, council workers, social workers and other people who work hard for the public on low or moderate pay were recruited into these schemes by tax advisers and bogus umbrella companies. It is an absolute disgrace that the Government are determined just to take on those individuals, rather than those who facilitated this avoidance for profit—those who fully knew what they were doing, and did it anyway.

If the reports are right, in some cases nurses or other public servants were made redundant by public sector organisations, only to be hired immediately as contractors through agencies who then facilitated these tax avoidance schemes. What action have the Government taken against those agencies? Some might say that this was fraud, because the schemes were not a genuine way to reduce tax liability. I have some sympathy with that view, because the schemes seem to have harmed many “clients”, and in my head I cannot justify a professional tax expert setting up such a scheme and getting a nurse, a social worker or someone else on a low or moderate wage involved in it. If it is not illegal for those tax experts to do that, it badly well should be.

Let me ask the Minister a direct question: if his Government maintain that these arrangements were illegal when entered into, why have they done nothing about the advisers who recommended them? Does he agree that when advisers promoted these schemes, they were promoting something illegal? The advisers get off scot-free while those who can ill afford it carry the can.

One of the employee benefit trust schemes we are talking about was created by Deloitte, which is one of the largest business services companies. It was put in place by Deutsche Bank, working with offshore entities in the Cayman Islands that were set up for this specific purpose. That was confirmed by the Supreme Court in 2016 following court rulings in 2014 and earlier. Two years on, however, there has been no investigation or prosecution, and no penalty for mass-marketing unlawful schemes. No accountancy firm has been disciplined by the professional body, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, and the Government did not even attempt to recover the legal costs spent fighting those cases. Why?

The Government’s priorities seem clear: they will not go after the enablers. We appear to be talking about advisers and employers who have exploited public service workers—workers who will see no benefit themselves—and at the same time directly reduced the tax that pays for those self-same public services. It is simply wrong, and it goes to show yet again how absurd, short-termist and unfair the outsourcing and privatisation policies have been.

We believe that clemency should be considered when businesses or people are at risk. As hon. Friends and other hon. Members have said today, if the loan charge causes businesses to go under next year, that will not help the Treasury recoup losses in the longer term. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, it will cost the public sector more if we have to evict people from their homes and rehouse them. I hope the Minister will tell us what the Government will do to treat everyone involved with compassion and care, particularly those who unintentionally fell foul of the schemes, including vulnerable people and those on low incomes. Campaigners say that the exact opposite is happening: people are being treated with little understanding or compassion by HMRC.

The impending deadline of April next year and the potentially severe consequences for anyone on a low wage who does not meet that deadline justify concerted outreach to those who have loan balances outstanding. We cannot let vulnerable people who have been exploited end up with massive tax debts hanging over their heads for many years to come. If we see bankruptcies, failing businesses, repossessions and even suicide, that will be because this Government have not done the outreach needed and not invested in adequate training. It will also be because the context for the charge is a cut to the HMRC workforce of 17% since 2010, even while they are rightly being asked to do more to tackle such complex problems.

We should not let the Government’s approach to loan schemes distract us from their absolute failure to deal with large-scale tax avoidance. Loan schemes are far from the only form that avoidance has taken in recent years, and are small in comparison with the tax avoidance methods used by the ultra-rich. Labour supports strong
measures against tax avoidance. We want the Government to go much further. We want them to go after the enablers—those who knew that the schemes were tax avoidance and illegal, but who peddled them anyway. Thank you.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): And thank you, shadow Minister. This gives the Minister extra time to answer all the questions he has been asked. He will leave two minutes, because he is generous, for Mr Baker to wrap up at 3.58 pm.

3.42 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Thank you, Mr Walker. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on bringing this debate to the Chamber. I acknowledge the 12 speeches from colleagues from across the House, who raised some very important issues on behalf of their constituents. Only last Friday, some of my constituents too came to raise the matter with me.

In the course of my response, I hope to address the significant issues discussed: time to pay; retrospection; whether HMRC is going after the promoters; what my hon. Friend said about the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes; the numbers involved; and the difference between retroactive and retrospective. I will also give some detail on the sums of money that we anticipate will be raised through the measure.

The responsibility of Government is to assess critically the impact of any tax reform, and to ensure that it is structured and implemented in the best possible way.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Government say not only that the loan charge is designed to treat loans as income, but that if the loans—now income—are written off, they will be subject to inheritance tax because the loan will not be repaid. Numerous court and tribunal findings agree that the loans were loans, not income, yet the Government press ahead regardless. Does the Minister agree that that is completely wrong and unfair?

John Glen: In the course of my speech, I will address that point. I am happy for the hon. Gentleman to come back to me later if he feels that I have not done so.

To be clear, I am the Economic Secretary; the Financial Secretary wanted to be here but he is in the main Chamber for the Finance Bill, so I am here in his place.

I acknowledge the early-day motion tabled by Members. It has attracted 103 signatures, and I also acknowledge the concern throughout the House on this matter. The concerns expressed are for people who have used a disguised remuneration scheme, who expect to have outstanding loans in April 2019, and who will be subject to the charge. I recognise that the Government need to be clear about why we legislated for this charge, which received Royal Assent following a full debate during the Finance Bill process in 2016-17. I will outline the steps that the Government have taken to help those individuals who may be affected.

The Government believe that it is not fair to ordinary taxpayers, who pay their tax on time and in full, to allow people who have used tax avoidance schemes to get away with it. Disguised remuneration tax avoidance schemes are contrived arrangements that use loans, often paid through offshore trusts, to avoid paying income tax and national insurance contributions. The schemes may have involved provision of a loan with no intention whatever to repay it. I spoke to the Financial Secretary this morning, while preparing for the debate, and he said, “Earnings are earnings, and a loan is a loan,” and that is what the issue boils down to.

Gareth Snell: I understand the Minister’s point, but before he progresses with his speech, will he clarify whether he accepts what many Members have asked this afternoon—that those who undertook the scheme did so in good faith, and therefore that the people ultimately in trouble for this system are those who perpetrated it, not those who signed up to it?

John Glen: I am happy to concede that for the 50,000 individuals affected, there are obviously responsibilities for those who promoted this. It is absolutely the case that HMRC is pursuing those individuals. They often promoted the scheme to large numbers of individuals. Five cases are before the courts—that seems a small number, but each one covers a large number of individuals—and there has been a judgment in one, with the other four cases still moving through the courts. It is not right to say that HMRC is not engaged with those who promoted the scheme.

Gareth Snell: Others set it up.

John Glen: Others did, I appreciate that—that is fair. I take on board the sentiment of the Chamber with respect to ensuring that HMRC is engaged with those who promoted the scheme, as well as the other individuals.

Lyn Brown: I will be gentle, because the Minister knows, as I do, the people who are really responsible in our respective parties for this particular piece of legislation. I would, however, be grateful if he takes on the responsibility to ensure that we are written to about the actions that the Government take against the enablers.

John Glen: I am very happy to engage with HMRC to get a letter setting out the action taken. I suspect that there might be some constraints on revealing details of individual live cases, but where data are available, I will make them available to hon. Members.

Tommy Sheppard: Will the Minister confirm, either now or in any such letter, the Treasury’s objectives in pursuing those companies? Is it to take retrospective action against them to try to recover the great volume of money they received from selling those schemes?

John Glen: HMRC’s objective will be to secure the money owed, as per the rules of the tax system. HMRC has enormous power to levy charges of up to £1 million on those individuals who are not complying.

The schemes may have involved provision of a loan with no intention to repay it. The recipients of such payments enjoyed them no differently from the way any of us use our normal income. As such, in the eyes of HMRC, the payments have always been taxable.
Mr John Hayes: We now learn from the Minister that HMRC knew that the schemes were inappropriate from the outset. So is he saying that HMRC is not malvolent but indiligent, inefficient and ineffective? If HMRC knew that, and the schemes were mainstream for 20 years, why is it acting only now?

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his point. Every scheme will be taken individually. They were not one single scheme that was developed. It is for HMRC to open cases on the disguised schemes, which it has done—going back many years on some of them—and it will take action as appropriate. A concern has been raised in the debate about not determining an outcome, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe raised the concern about the implication that, when a tax avoidance scheme has been disclosed, that is somehow a verification or an endorsement of it. That is a misleading perception that has been left, and something for which HMRC should be accountable.

Mr Hayes: Forgive me. I will not intervene more than twice on the Minister, because I know he wants to make progress. I have always regarded HMRC as an efficient organisation that goes about its business properly. Is this not about the Government? The Government took a view about all this and I suspect that, although it may be true that HMRC is implementing Government policy, this is really about the Government changing their mind. That is what we are asking for.

John Glen: The Government that my right hon. Friend was part of and, I believe, a Minister in at the time the legislation was passed. [Interruption.] Let me make some progress.

Although the measure subjects the loans to a tax charge, that 2019 charge applies only to current loan balances and does not arise until April 2019. Recipients of loans can still repay outstanding balances in full or settle with HMRC. The legislation is not retrospective because it sets out Parliament’s intention: payments subject to the loan charge should always have been, and will be, subject to tax. The announcement in the 2016 spring Budget by the former Member for Tatton provided scheme users with a three-year period in which to repay disguised remuneration loans or agree a settlement with HMRC to avoid the charge.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Nearly 50% of those who are liable for the loan charge have not had any communication with HMRC since June 2016. Some of them are my constituents. Does the Minister agree that HMRC must accelerate its communications, to take that cloud of uncertainty away from those who are affected?

John Glen: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. There have been 24,000 contacts with HMRC. The number of telephone calls has increased from 2,000 to 4,000 a week and extra resources have been made available by HMRC, but I am happy to take up any individual cases that my hon. Friend may wish to bring to me.

In the view of the Government and of HMRC, the payments were always taxable as income, and the new legislation reiterates and formalises that stance.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is being very generous with his time. That final point reiterates the issue here. I have constituents who are employed in the construction industry and when they were taken on by the agencies—the umbrella companies—through which they had to go to access the work, they simply were not aware of their liabilities and were not made aware of them. This is a natural justice issue. The policy is harming people who are not particularly well paid, have done everything right and are being unfairly punished.

John Glen: The responsibility to settle tax affairs is on an individual basis. If an employer forced an individual into a tax arrangement of this sort, the employer would be in a liable position.

Several hon. Members rose—

John Glen: Let me make some more progress or, despite the time I have, I will not get to the end of my speech and I want to address the points raised.

Anyone who has been involved in legal action will be well aware that it can be protracted and expensive for all concerned. Agreeing a settlement with HMRC allows taxpayers to move on, and out of avoidance for good. In most cases, any users of schemes will be better off approaching HMRC and agreeing a settlement rather than waiting for the charge next April, and HMRC is encouraging anyone worried about being able to pay to get in touch as soon as possible.

Joseph Johnson: On the point about taxpayers wanting to move on, several of my constituents have requested settlement sums from HMRC but have not received a response, notwithstanding the passage of several months. That is prolonging their uncertainty and anxiety. Will the Minister take steps to ensure that HMRC responds to those requests for settlement as rapidly as possible?

John Glen: I certainly will. I took the precaution of speaking to the Financial Secretary again this morning, and I would like to clarify that, with the time-to-pay arrangements, the five-year period will automatically be put in place for those with incomes of less than £50,000. For those with larger incomes, there is an opportunity for dialogue with HMRC. With respect to individuals who have not had that settlement made known, I will be happy, as we all will as constituency MPs, to take those cases up with HMRC.

HMRC is helping thousands of scheme users to get out of avoidance for good.

Kirsty Blackman rose—

John Glen: Just one moment. It will consider all personal circumstances to agree a manageable and sustainable payment plan wherever possible, and it has recently announced simplified payment terms for individuals looking to settle their tax affairs before 2019. I want to address another issue of the debate. Those who oppose the legislation have made claims that the loan charge will bankrupt public sector workers, including teachers, nurses and social workers. It is my understanding
that 1,500, or 3%, of individuals will be involved in the health and education sectors but that most of the scheme users worked in professional services. The average salary of the scheme users was £66,000, which is considerably higher than the average annual wage.

Lyn Brown rose—

John Glen: In fairness, I should allow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) to intervene.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): There is no time, Minister. You have 40 seconds.

Kirsty Blackman: I have contacted HMRC on behalf of constituents and have been told that it cannot talk to me about those individuals and that they will get an answer by 5 April. That is not helpful.

John Glen: I obviously cannot respond on an individual’s situation, but what I will say is that disguised remuneration schemes are complex and contrived and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe said, fail the “too good to be true” test.

Although the Financial Secretary and I have tremendous sympathy for those facing large tax bills, it is unfair to let people get away with not paying the tax they owe. There is support for people who have used the schemes and now find themselves in difficult situations, which require those affected to approach HMRC and bring the matter to a close. I will now allow my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe to make some concluding remarks.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to everyone who has come to the debate and participated. The debate has overwhelmingly avoided straying into the partisan, for which I am grateful. I listened carefully to all the speeches and I do not think anyone stood up and sided with those who think it is legitimate to be paid through loans that have been made with no intention of repayment—no one stood on that side of the argument. What we have seen is how people have been drawn, or even driven, into such schemes, and that is the heart of the injustice.

We have heard stories of human suffering that would melt any heart, which brings us on to the heart of the matter—the rule of law. Once again, my hon. Friend the Minister has earned my admiration, because he seems to get all the Treasury’s toughest gigs. I sometimes wonder whether he should have been promoted to the Department for Exiting the European Union for a little break.

John Glen: No thanks.

Mr Baker: He will have heard the response of people present when he explained that the measure is not retrospective, and I really hope that the Treasury goes away, looks at the measure again and eliminates retrospection. When people have acted in good faith under advice and end up subject to injustice, we must uphold the principle of the rule of law. Some might then say that they had got away with it, but sometimes we have to say, “While we don’t stand on their side and we accept that it was not Parliament’s intent, we respect that there is a price to be paid for upholding the rule of law so that in the end we can preserve human liberty and justice.”

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Housing Bodies: Accountability

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accountability of housing bodies.

You and I have known each other for a long time, Mr Hollobone, and I am not sure whether this is the first debate I have been at that you have chaired, but nevertheless, it is welcome to see you in the Chair.

I want to examine a number of core issues in this debate before giving some recommendations to the Government. First, I want to look at the adequacy of the assessment that is currently in place to examine the quality of the design and build of new houses. I also want to consider the accountability of housing organisations when they have made mistakes or are mistreating customers, as it is my opinion that currently, they are not adequately held to account. Lastly, I want to address the way in which data regulations apply to Members of Parliament. That issue has arisen in relation to a housing organisation through my casework, and I know that many other Members have encountered similar problems in their own casework.

We have had numerous debates on the urgent need for more, and better-quality housing. I support efforts to increase the number of houses being built, and that should be happening at a faster rate. It is also vital that those homes are council-owned—I have always believed in that, and the privatisation of housing since 1980 has contributed to the issues that I will be addressing.

In Coventry, we have had several problems with housing organisations’ unhelpfulness when responding to their residents’ concerns. A quick search of our casework database has shown that dozens of constituents have contacted me this year about their housing situation. Housing organisations seem to be particularly unhelpful when responding to complaints, and the same names of problematic housing organisations keep coming up.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate before the House. Many of the concerns that he has cited, and those I am sure he will be citing later, have been represented to me by my constituents who face similar issues, especially Robert Taylor from the Camden Federation of Private Tenants. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is high time that a Select Committee inquiry takes place, examining the accountability of housing associations and their lack of oversight by both tenants and Members?

Mr Cunningham: I could not agree more. Such a review is long overdue, as even the data protection people do not give us clear answers about what information we are entitled to. They seem to forget that at the end of the day, we are the last line of defence for tenants—and anybody else who has problems, for that matter.

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the major problems is the transparency of housing associations? We had a notorious case in Orchard Village in South Hornchurch, which was raised in a debate in this place. One of the big problems was that housing associations were departing from their historical, ethical role of filling gaps in the market and becoming housing developers themselves, lacking oversight and transparency, and therefore no comeback was possible on behalf of our constituents.

Mr Cunningham: My hon. Friend has highlighted another major problem: at times, housing organisations hide behind the Data Protection Act 1998 to obscure the fact that they are bad managers of housing estates. That suggests that there is a wider issue with competition in the market, allowing poorer customer service to go unchallenged. Like most parts of the country, Coventry has recently seen some new, small-scale housing developments, and issues have arisen in a significant number of those developments as a result of the quality of the build. One recent example in Coventry has been the Philmont Court development in Tile Hill. That development of 48 flats is actually in my neighbouring constituency, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), who cannot be here today because he has other business.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making some powerful comments, and I thank him for securing the debate. Over the past few years, I have had considerable issues in my constituency, particularly with A2Dominion and FirstPort. Does he agree that the quality of build requires stronger regulation? I have had issues with letterboxes where mail can be taken from outside, and with residents saying that poor-quality materials are being used, particularly in areas where there is shared ownership rather than private ownership. All of that reduces confidence, particularly among first-time buyers, and those who are struggling and making ends meet in order to get on to the housing ladder and feel proud of the home they live in.

Mr Cunningham: That is why I mentioned the Philmont estate in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West. There, there has been bad workmanship—to say the least—and a bad build. Residents have been moved out of their houses for a period of about 40 weeks and cannot get any compensation. They have to rent privately to get accommodation; who is going to compensate them? My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) has highlighted similar problems to those we have in Coventry. The builders, Persimmon, have particularly let down residents by refusing to take any responsibility or pay compensation.

Of course, there are sometimes unforeseen issues with the quality of the design and building of a house. However, there seem to be widespread problems with new builds due to rushed building and substandard resources. I also hear from an increasing number of constituents about delays in moving into their new-build houses. I have one constituent who has had a seven-month delay in the building of her new home this year, which has made her and her children homeless: they are having to get by in a friend’s spare room. I am certain that that is the case across the country, as my hon. Friend touched on. I am also sure that there are many more people out there who are affected by delays, but who never contact us because they do not think they will get anywhere.
I would like the Government to review the checks that are currently in place regarding the design and build of houses. They should also look at the support offered to customers by housing organisations when issues arise. We must make sure that mistakes and errors are found early in the process, and that delays are lessened as much as possible.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Can we please note that the things that are wrong with these houses are not simply minor issues? I spoke to a woman on Saturday whose staircase had twice collapsed. Another constituent had the roof of their new home collapse. These problems are really serious; they are not just little things that need to be put right after someone has moved in.

Mr Cunningham: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Given local government cuts, trading standards officers cannot police this sector any more—it is as simple as that. That is one reason why these housing organisations are getting away with it, but the law should be tightened up as well.

Seema Malhotra: Does my hon. Friend agree that poor-quality materials can have other impacts, not just on the benefit of the asset if it is in shared ownership, but by creating situations where the quality of the ceilings or the walls results in greater noise going through from one property to another—people being able to hear each other’s toilets flush, for example? That impacts on neighbourly relations and puts residents in a difficult position. Finally, regarding the architecture of how blocks are built, there have been cases where bin storage areas have been built on the ground floor of flats. That has resulted in rats running riot through those properties, causing tremendous damage and requiring expense on the part of residents to put it right.

Mr Cunningham: I agree with my hon. Friend. We are building up health problems among future generations, particularly the young children who are growing up in these properties. We had thought we had moved away from the type of housing that people used to experience in the 1930s.

I now want to discuss the accountability that Members offer when we work on behalf of constituents through our casework.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is making some very good points, but on the wider issue of accountability, rather than accountability just to Members, we are talking about a comprehensive public service that is offered to residents, including those with disabilities, older residents and people recovering from illness. Do we not need more oversight and more joined-up thinking between housing providers and other parts of the public sector? The current lack of oversight and lack of integration with the housing associations makes things very difficult. We end up further marginalising some very vulnerable people as a result.

Mr Cunningham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I would add that we need the resources, too. We cannot have joined-up thinking without providing them. We have to provide the resources for resolution of the problems, even if we have joined-up thinking. I do not necessarily disagree with him, but it is a question of resources.

I recently had a piece of casework where a constituent had an issue with his housing association, Orbit Housing, in Coventry. Without going into too much detail, the constituent had a concern that Orbit Housing was not adequately dealing with. I wrote to Orbit Housing, and we had the usual initial exchange of correspondence before it investigated the matter further. However, the correspondence I was receiving soon stopped, and I had to chase it for what was an undetailed response. We have all had experiences of delayed and undetailed responses to casework correspondence—I would like to see an improvement in the speed and helpfulness of responses—but that is not the main issue arising from this case. When I eventually received a final letter from Orbit Housing, it was highly unsatisfactory after such a delay.

Orbit Housing said that it could not tell me what steps it was taking because of data regulations. I make it clear that I do not want to know what people have in their bank account or when they got married. We do not want that information; we want to know that the issues we are raising are being pursued, and we want to know the details of how they are being pursued.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is making an important point about how public bodies are using the General Data Protection Regulation to obstruct Members of Parliament seeking to represent their constituents. On a housing-related issue involving someone with disabilities, I had to table some written parliamentary questions, and I asked the Ministry of Justice to establish an MP hotline for the tribunals service due to the difficulties I have been experiencing in getting satisfactory answers. I have had to get in the habit of copying tribunal inquiries directly to the Minister in order to obtain a response. Does my hon. Friend believe that the Government should issue guidance to public bodies, explaining what implicit consent means and stopping them obstructing Members of Parliament in carrying out their duties on behalf of constituents?

Mr Cunningham: I cannot agree more with my hon. Friend. In fact, on occasions when we have been dealing with constituency correspondence with outside organisations, we have also asked the constituent to sign a form giving us permission. We should not have to go to those lengths. When we talk about trust in politicians, that is a good example of where we are not being trusted. Our constituents trust us because we are the last line of defence. Where do they go after us, whatever the problem might be?

I have had the problem of organisations refusing to give me information on a constituent’s case many times. It used to happen a lot after the passing of the Data Protection Act 1998, before being somewhat dealt with by the Data Protection (Processing of Sensitive Personal Data) (Elected Representatives) Order 2002. However, it seems that more and more organisations are using the new data regulations to avoid responding to casework. I am clear that I do not consider the case closed with Orbit Housing, and today is a good chance for us all to recognise that we need to be bloody difficult people on behalf of our constituents to get results.
As I have already said, the problem I had with Orbit Housing is not unique. I have asked other Members whether they have had similar problems in conducting their constituency casework. Many Members have made clear through their interventions today that they have, as have many Members who cannot be here today. The vast majority of Members who replied to me said that they had faced some form of obstruction. That ranged from delays to a complete refusal to share information with us, due to the data regulations—at least, that was the excuse. After receiving the response from Orbit Housing, I started looking at how data regulations apply to Members. I also wrote to the Information Commissioner and the Leader of the House to request clarification.

The EU’s General Data Protection Regulation and the UK’s Data Protection Act 2018 are our core data regulations. According to the legislation, we are data processors when we are handling a constituent’s casework. Data processors have to make sure they have a specific reason to process someone’s information. We are covered in our casework by two of the reasons outlined in the legislation: consent and public task. When a constituent writes asking for us to take action on an issue, it constitutes them giving us consent to discuss their personal data with them. Some organisations, however, do not accept that as a reason to process someone’s information. That is the whole point.

However, consent is not necessarily always required, as we have a good second legitimate reason. Public task is when data processing is necessary to perform a task in the public interest or for official functions. Members have made clear that they have been able to advance a case more than a constituent could alone. If third-party organisations refuse to share information on a constituent’s case with us, our constituents suffer and we are left failing to hold organisations to account. The law must be tightened up to empower us and, in turn, to empower our constituents.

4.21 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to appear once again before your wise and well-tempered supervision, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) on securing this important debate on a number of housing issues, which I will seek to address.

First, I thank the hon. Gentleman and other Members for assisting their constituents with numerous housing issues. I know from my own experience that housing can form a large part of an MP’s postbag, and I am grateful for the liaison with landlords and the resolution that is achieved. They are working with residents, to set their approach on securing this important debate on a number of housing issues, including their performance against those standards through an annual report. The regulator of social housing expects all registered providers of social housing to have in place a complaints process that is clear, simple and accessible. Landlords are also expected to publish their performance against those standards through an annual report. The regulator does not proactively enforce standards on complaint handling. The onus is on individual landlords, working with residents, to set their approach and timescales for handling residents’ complaints. However, the regulator considers every referral made to it, signposting those not within its remit to other organisations, including the ombudsman service.

I stress that if any hon. Member acting on a constituent’s behalf is unhappy with the response provided by a registered provider of social housing, once the landlord’s complaints process has been exhausted, that hon. Member...
may take the matter further. Social housing residents can approach the housing ombudsman service at any time to seek advice. However, currently they must pass the democratic filter, either referring a complaint to a designated person—a local councillor, Member of Parliament or tenant panel—or waiting eight weeks after their landlord’s investigation has concluded before a complaint can be formally investigated by the housing ombudsman.

The Government’s social housing Green Paper consultation, “A new deal for social housing”, which closed on 6 November, sought views on how to improve the system for seeking redress for social housing residents. We engaged extensively with residents to inform and shape the Green Paper. We heard that residents want redress quickly when things go wrong, and want processes to be clearer and simpler. We want to ensure that residents receive the help that they need to put things right when they have a housing problem. The Green Paper asked a range of questions on how we could deliver that, including questions about the future of the democratic filter, which can delay the complaints process.

Alongside those questions, the Green Paper set out proposals better to hold landlords to account. We consider that stronger action is required against landlords who consistently fail their residents. Part of the solution is to enable residents to understand and compare the performance of landlords. We have proposed a limited number of key performance indicators to achieve that, including a potential indicator on the effective handling of complaints.

Following publication of the Green Paper, we continued our face-to-face engagement with landlords and residents across the country. We wanted to give them an opportunity to input into and influence the consultation outcome. I assure hon. Members that they had some strong views about the handling of complaints, both positive and negative, which I heard myself, having visited six such events across the country. We are currently analysing the findings of those events alongside the other consultation responses, and we aim to publish our response in the spring.

As Members will know, the General Data Protection Regulation, also known as GDPR, imposes new rules on controlling and processing personally identifiable information. In addition, the regulator of social housing is clear that registered providers of social housing should accept complaints made by advocates, including Members of Parliament authorised to act on behalf of a social housing resident. I am not aware of the specific circumstances that the hon. Member for Coventry South mentioned, but I reassure him and other Members that nothing in GDPR or in the Data Protection Act 2018 prevents us from acting on behalf of our constituents in discussions with a registered provider of social housing.

Mr Jim Cunningham: It would be helpful if the Minister circulated that advice on data protection to all concerned, so that the situation is perfectly clear. We often get conflicting views about it.

Kit Malthouse: That is a good suggestion. I have to stress that the hon. Gentleman, and other hon. Members who wish to act on their constituents’ behalf, must be instructed by the constituent before they can do so. That is no different from the arrangements that existed before the GDPR was introduced. In requesting assistance from their Member of Parliament, any resident is effectively giving consent for that MP to process their personal data. A housing association should normally accept a Member of Parliament’s word. However, I appreciate that a housing association or local authority landlord might, if the case is particularly sensitive or other individuals are involved, double-check with the tenant. I stress that that should not be used as a delaying or obstructive mechanism; it is merely an extra protection for the tenant in specific circumstances.

Of course, if the constituent or their MP considers that the processing of the concerned resident’s data goes beyond what the resident might have expected, they should be consulted first. Let me make it crystal clear to all landlords that they should co-operate and engage constructively with Members of Parliament when they act as advocates, within the constraints of data protection. I am pleased that the Information Commissioner has issued the following guidance:

“Consent can be implied from a relevant action, in this case the raising of the matter by a constituent with the Member in the expectation that his or her personal data will be further processed by the Member and relevant third party organisations.”

I can circulate the commissioner’s guidance after the debate.

Finally, I will talk about checks on the quality of building and design—an important issue, given the scale of house building that we are experiencing, and hopefully will in increased numbers in the years to come. As a Department, we are focusing on the quality of build and design as a critical issue for the future expansion of house building. I hope that the hon. Member for Coventry South accepts, though, that when it comes to a new building, the person carrying out the building work is responsible for complying with the requirements of the building regulations. That person remains legally liable for non-compliance.

All new buildings are subject to building control supervision, either by the local authority or an approved inspector. Both are required by law to take all reasonable steps to check on the compliance of building work. Where work is found not to comply, the building control body will require it to be put right before giving a compliance certificate. We are sending a clear message that if something goes wrong with a newly built home, house builders and warranty providers, including the National House Building Council, should fulfil their obligations to put things right.

In addition, on 1 October, the Government announced a new homes ombudsman to champion the rights of homebuyers and to hold developers to account. Once a building is occupied, social housing landlords are required to comply with the regulator’s home standard, which sets two clear outcomes. First, homes must be of good quality through meeting the decent homes standard. Secondly, landlords must provide a cost-effective service to homes and communal areas that responds to the needs of, and offers choice to tenants, and aims to complete repairs and improvements first time.

Once again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this valuable debate. I hope that he and other Members will continue to support all residents, including those living in social housing, in dealing with housing complaints. We are committed to ensuring that social housing residents
can seek timely and effective solutions when they have a housing problem. I also hope that in future all landlords ensure that issues such as those raised today do not hinder or delay their residents’ seeking effective and efficient redress.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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**UK Sovereign Capability**

4.30 pm

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK sovereign capability.

This is a subject that I have spoken about frequently since my election and is close to my heart. I grew up in a shipbuilding family, so from a very early age I became acquainted with the concept of feast and famine orders in shipbuilding in this country. I also developed an awareness of what we need to do to maintain a sovereign capability, not just in shipbuilding but across the full spectrum of defence.

I will be 30 years old in January. Britain’s defence industry landscape has diminished considerably since I was born. Look at shipbuilding. I attended my first ship launch—of HMS Lancaster—when I was one year old. There were a number of shipyards around the UK that built surface vessels, including Swan Hunter in Tyneside and Cammell Laird—

**Frank Field** (Birkenhead) (Ind): In Birkenhead.

**Mr Sweeney:** In Birkenhead, as my right hon. Friend says. We also had Vosper Thornycroft in Southampton, and Harland and Wolff in Belfast, to name just a few, but today the landscape is much diminished. The Clyde is the only UK location capable of building complex warships, and even its capabilities have been significantly downsized. In 2013, when I was working in that very shipyard, more than 1,500 jobs in the shipbuilding industry were lost, and the BAE Systems shipyard in Portsmouth—formerly Vosper Thornycroft—closed.

Some 75% of shipbuilding jobs in the UK have been lost since the 1980s. That downsizing was predicated on a realisation that Britain did not have a naval fleet big enough to sustain the industrial base that existed at the time. Rather than drip-feeding orders to yards that would never be at full enough capacity to invest in world-class infrastructure, the idea was to cut our cloth accordingly, so in 2009 the then Labour Government signed a terms of business agreement with BAE Systems. The concept was to introduce a proper and rigorous strategy for shipbuilding in the UK. In return for rationalisation and transformation, the industry would be guaranteed a certain drumbeat of industrial capacity that would give it the confidence to invest in reaching the upper quartile of the world.

When I started working in the shipyards as a young graduate, one of my jobs was to study every other shipyard in the world that was building complex warships, benchmark us against them, determine what they were doing right and develop a prescription that would allow us to design a world-class shipyard in the UK. That seemed a laudable aspiration, because if we could build an infrastructure in the certainty of a pipeline of orders, we could build ships that achieved world-class performance, saving the taxpayer money. It was such a great idea that other countries followed the same model—most notably Canada, which developed its own national shipbuilding strategy and, indeed, employed the very same person from the Royal Navy who developed our strategy under the terms of business agreement.
Sadly, when I corresponded with the Minister for defence people and veterans last November, he informed me that the terms of business agreement had been extinguished in return for the signature of the Type 26 manufacture phase 1 contract. It was then superseded by the national shipbuilding strategy, which in the meantime was used as cover to significantly reduce the scope of ships that the UK had been qualified to build, and that had given certainty to UK industry. The very first page of the strategy document states:

“It is only by building ships that we will once again become good at building ships”.

Well, quite. That seems like a laudable aspiration and exactly what we all want to achieve, but unfortunately the strategy itself undermines that effort, restricting the scope of orders that can go through UK shipyards by limiting the exclusivity of UK build to frigates, destroyers and aircraft carriers.

The 2009 terms of business agreement made very clear the range of ships that were to be built exclusively in the UK without competition, including aircraft carriers; amphibious vessels; all forms of frigates and destroyers; mine countermeasure vessels, including all design and major subcontracted work; all minor naval vessels, including patrol ships; and complex auxiliary ships, which at the time meant the vessels for joint sea-based logistics and joint casualty treatment. That certainty would have enabled British industry to invest in world-class facilities that delivered world-class performance for UK shipyards, achieving the competitive advantage that we had so long striven for. Given that other countries are successfully employing the very same model—Canada now plans to build 15 Type 26 frigates, as opposed to Britain’s much diminished effort of just eight, if we even get them—it is self-evident that we are doing something very wrong by undermining that effort.

It seems to me that the national shipbuilding strategy, particularly the Type 31e frigate project, is a classic example of the Government misidentifying the root cause of the problem that they are trying to solve. The UK prosperity agenda and the effort to make our industry better would be much better served by providing certainty for industry to invest in being world class. That would achieve the opening gambit set out in the strategy document.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the challenges for the prosperity agenda, and for the Royal Navy’s aspiration to be part of making us a global maritime nation again post Brexit, is that the Treasury does not have a model that helps the Ministry of Defence to plan for that or values the impact that building in the UK rather than abroad would have on the coffers of UK plc?

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Lady for that pertinent intervention, which drives home the point that I am trying to make. I am highlighting the landscape as I see it now, which is not what we want to achieve and is not optimal. That is not necessarily the fault of the Ministry of Defence, but of what Sir John Parker’s report refers to as the “total enterprise” of shipbuilding, which very much includes the Treasury as financial controller.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), the MOD is at fault. It takes no account whatever, either in shipbuilding or in other procurement contracts, of the value added to the UK economy, not just in skills but in the money that the Treasury gets back through tax and national insurance.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister might have been hopeful that I was absolving him of all blame in the matter, but I did not quite mean that; I meant that it was not entirely the fault of the Ministry of Defence, because there is a combined silo mentality across Government. My right hon. Friend makes the important point that in shipbuilding and in major defence procurement programmes, there has been a failure to understand the total prosperity effort across the UK. Royal Caribbean would never approach financing the building of a cruise ship in the way that the Ministry of Defence finances its frigates. The MOD does not achieve anywhere near the sort of efficiencies that commercial operators such as Cunard or Royal Caribbean achieve.

The MOD and the UK Government’s considerations ought to be about what maximises industrial and economic benefit to the UK as a whole, but they have failed to incorporate that into their processes for making these critical decisions. To give a classic example, modelling done by the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions makes it clear that if major shipbuilding programmes were procured in the UK, the return of wage and supplier payments to the Exchequer would effectively achieve a 20% net material discount. The prosperity of those programmes would flow back into the UK economy instead of being bled out into another country.

Frank Field: The hon. Gentleman described the order for eight frigates earlier. Before the first world war, there was the great cry for dreadnoughts—“we want eight and we can’t wait.” Whatever the size of the Government’s programme, is not one of the problems the reliability of the dates for when they start commissioning the programme, which is very important for the longer-term future of shipbuilding? Is it not also about, with this phase, the confirmation that they will give a role in bidding—and therefore a chance of winning—to yards such as Cammell Laird’s, which has done so well recently in helping to build defence orders, but also in winning a major merchant contract, which I think is the first for a British yard in 20 or 30 years?

Mr Sweeney: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. Britain became a pre-eminent naval power because its industry was pre-eminent and because it was an innovator. That is what we need to get back to. The national shipbuilding strategy is trying to achieve that, but it falls short on how it will deliver it, because it militates against the very objectives it is trying to achieve. Industry needs certainty of capacity, so that it can invest with a degree of vigour in shipbuilding.

I talked about HMS Lancaster and the launch of the Type 23 frigate, which was my first ship launch, as a babe in arms, at Yarrow’s in Scotstoun. Sir Bob Easton was chairman of Yarrow’s at that time and made it quite clear that the Type 23 frigate was being bid in batches of three. It was Swan Hunter versus Yarrow. In 1990, Bob Easton said, “I am currently employing 2,500 people in my shipyard. I can employ them until the end of 1991. If I don’t get an order next year, I am making 1,000 of those people redundant, and that is the stark reality of
what I am facing. It is not just about the jobs. I would like to invest in a new covered shipbuilding facility. I would like to invest in modernised plant machinery, but the business case does not stack up, unless I know for sure that I am going to be building all of those Type 23 frigates.”

The same issue is playing out today. The national shipbuilding strategy harks back to the same mentality, driving the same behaviours. Whether it is Cammell Laird or BAE Systems, they will not be able to say that they have a prescription for a world-class frigate factory, as it was dubbed, or a modern dock hall covered facility. They will not be able to make that business case stack up. They will not be able to put their shareholders’ money into that and to finance it, unless there is the certainty on the horizon that they will be building the entire programme, and unless there is legal certainty that that will happen. Without that certainty, companies cannot make the investment and we therefore cannot get the operational efficiencies that deliver the savings and the cost reductions that would enable the Royal Navy, ultimately, to build a larger fleet. That is the virtuous cycle that we ought to be striving towards. Unfortunately, the strategy document undermines it.

When it comes to Type 31, the same point is still an excellent one. By bidding it in blocks and spreading it around the country, we lose the critical mass and do not get the certainty that would allow a shipyard such as Cammell Laird’s to invest in building a production line of Type 31 frigates, in parallel with a production line of Type 26 frigates. Ultimately, we want to get to exactly what the Americans do. They have been building Arleigh Burke cruisers since the 1980s; they have built the exact same ship in a consistent way for the last 30 years or more.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good point. Does he agree that we were promised 13 frigates in 2014, not eight plus five general purpose ships? The shipyard workers in both Scotstoun and Govan have been hugely let down by those broken promises.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the hon. Lady for Glasgow—

Carol Monaghan: North West.

Mr Sweeney: Glasgow North West. It was much better when we had the proper place names for constituencies.

Carol Monaghan: Anniesland.

Mr Sweeney: Yes, Anniesland. I was one of those shipyard workers at the time. I agree that certain understandings were given about investment. Indeed, the bulk of Scotstoun shipyard was demolished on the premise that it was going to be rebuilt as a new modern dock hall. I was personally involved in the project to design it; my personal investment in that project is second to none. However, it has to be recognised that the Clyde has certainty to the 2030s, although we need to go further in making the most of the opportunity we have.

I understand from the MOD that its ultimate aspiration would be to build Type 26 frigates in perpetuity if it could—if it had that certainty of financing and planning. Then we could be certain that the Clyde would always be the centre of production for those larger frigates. That would mean that other yards around the UK, such as Birkenhead, could focus on smaller projects, such as the Type 31, which could form a critical mass of a learning curve and a productivity enhancement, and secure the investment that would make it excellent at building those ships and more likely to win overseas orders as a result.

Frank Field: A strategy like that, with unit costs coming down, would allow us to compete seriously in the export market.

Mr Sweeney: Unit costs ought to come down but the problem is that the shipbuilding strategy is defined makes it more likely that the cost reductions will not be maximised. That is a great shame, because it undermines the aspirations of the strategy.

I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on shipbuilding and ship repair, and we hope to bring forward a report on the strategy very soon. It will highlight some of the opportunities to improve it, because we all share the same aspiration. We want to see a world-class industry in the UK that has the certainty to invest. We want a world-class product that is cost-effective enough to grow the size of the Royal Navy.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly focuses on warships, but it is also about the civilian ships for the Ministry of Defence. Unlike every one of our European competitors, the Ministry of Defence stubbornly insists on advertising abroad. There is a point about maintaining a competent workforce and the drumbeat of production, as well as the supply chain and the supply ecosystem, which is so important for sustaining all the yards. Can my hon. Friend find a logical, rational explanation for why the Ministry of Defence refuses to behave like every other European naval country?

Mr Sweeney: My right hon. Friend’s point goes back to that made earlier about the Treasury’s behaviour. I feel that this is almost about an economic orthodoxy that drives behaviour and says that we must maximise competitive tendering for the sake of it, because there is some sort of axiom that it works because it does. That approach does not bear scrutiny. Shipbuilding has the highest barriers to entry of any major industry in the world. It is a hugely capital-intensive industry and the only way to make it work, and the only way to get to a world-class, market-dominant position—much like with aerospace, where, as we know, the Americans and Europeans built their own champions in the form of Airbus and Boeing—is by having that synergy between Government, industry and the research and development base that makes it work. That is what we ought to have with shipbuilding in the UK. Fragmenting it in the way proposed in the national shipbuilding strategy serves only to undermine the UK’s long-term sovereign capability in shipbuilding. It is the primary sovereign interest of the UK to have that capability. We are an island nation, a nation of islanders and shipbuilders, and we ought to maintain that capability.

There are critical issues at stake here. We have already heard that Appledore, owned by Babcock, is due to close in March, which will be a devastating blow to the local community and to the UK’s wider defence
manufacturing base. It is yet another shipyard to fall. Once it falls, it will not recover and be reopened—that is a simple fact. Once it is gone, it is gone. Despite the recent contract announcement at Cammell Laird, it is also completing an HR1 notification form and making significant redundancies. That is very unfortunate, and speaks to the point about feast and famine. We cannot have these cycles in capacity any more; we need to smooth the cycle as much as possible.

In the context of major shipyard closures and significant downsizing, whether that is at Rosyth or Appledore, it is bizarre that the Government are quite happy to tender contracts overseas in international open competition. Under article 346 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union, the Government could quite easily designate the industry as UK-protected. It is entirely at their discretion. Any notion that their hands are tied is bogus. They could do that, smooth the production cycles and build a firm and stable footprint for UK shipyards, which would enable them to get match fit and then go out into the world and compete effectively for other orders. That is exactly what they do in Italy with Fincantieri, and what they do in France with DCNS. It is exactly what happens in Germany.

I do not understand why other European Union member states can achieve the same objectives much more effectively than us, but we are so holier than thou that it hurts when it comes to the zealous application of these EU rules and we seem to undermine our own industrial base and our prosperity as a result, meaning that communities are broken and skills lost. Ultimately, we undermine our objective of building a more resilient and effective industrial base to serve our defence industry and, potentially, commercial spin-offs.

Barrow-in-Furness is another example. The gap between the end of the Vanguard programme in the 1990s and the beginning of the Astute programme meant that the shipyard was essentially unable to build a submarine and they had to go to General Dynamics in the United States to be retaught how to build them. That is what we risk losing again if we are not careful.

**John Spellar:** It was surely not just the design capability and the managerial capability, but the actual day-to-day work experience and the work teams that have been created and then broken up. It took 12 to 24 months to rebuild that capability and was hugely expensive. The Ministry of Defence and the Treasury have still not learnt that lesson.

**Mr Sweeney:** My right hon. Friend makes a very prescient point. There is no calculation of the opportunity cost when those skills are lost or of how much it costs to build them back up. The feast and famine cycle is hugely costly and inefficient, and the national shipbuilding strategy risks going back to that pattern. I think that is a critical point that the Minister really ought to address in his remarks about the national shipbuilding strategy.

Let me make it clear that we are all here to try to deliver the best outcome for defence infrastructure in the UK—we are trying to get to the same end goal. We are trying to offer the best of our understanding and experience of these issues to inform this document and improve it as much as we can, and it is fair to say that we want to achieve the same objectives.

We have also seen the development of a combat air strategy—the Tempest programme—which is laudable and looks promising, but there is a lack of an overarching objective on defence. We have already lost the capacity to build large fixed-wing aircraft through the cancellation of the Nimrod programme, which was done hastily by the disastrous 2010 strategic defence and security review and means that we have permanently lost that capability in the UK. Similarly, we have lost the capacity to build main battle tanks.

What else is at risk, and where is the risk profile of the sovereign capabilities that will be lost? What is expendable and what is indispensable? That is not defined in the national shipbuilding strategy, where there is talk of potentially putting the Type 31e combat management system out to international tender. Why do we not define what the key sovereign capability is—not just in the shipbuilding programme, but in aspects of its critical supply chain, including gearboxes, gas turbines, combat management systems, weapons systems and so on? We need to have that granularity of detail in the national shipbuilding strategy, but it is not there. That leaves it open to interpretation and extreme gerrymandering by the Ministry of Defence.

Those are the key issues that we have to highlight, whether they are across land, maritime—I am biased towards maritime, which I have focused on heavily—or aerospace. I am sure that other Members are willing to contribute and add their own thoughts to this debate, but essentially that is an overview of my main concerns about our UK sovereign capability and the risks to sustaining it.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** The debate can last until 5.30 pm, and I am obliged to call the first of the Front-Bench spokespeople at 5.7 pm. The guidelines limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. We will then have time at the end for Mr Sweeney to sum up the debate. Two Members are seeking to catch my eye, and there has to be a time limit of six minutes and 30 seconds each. I first call Kevan Jones.

4.53 pm

**Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this debate. He emphasised the lack of strategy on maritime sovereign capability, but we need to ask the broader question of why we are in this mess today.

Since 2010, this Government have had no industrial strategy on defence. Some of the short-term decisions that were taken in 2010, when the Government slashed the defence budget by 16%, have resulted in capability gaps. A revolving door has been put on the office of the Minister for Defence Procurement, which means that they have a life expectancy a bit longer than a mayfly. That is not helpful when we need a champion in that role who can argue against the Treasury.

Why is sovereign capability important? If we want to have certain capabilities for the defence of our nation, we need to invest in them. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) has raised the issue of defence exports. He is right to say that if we are to nourish that
industry, there is a defence export role to it. The Ministry of Defence and the Treasury have adopted Donald Trump’s mantra of “Make America great again”, because the procurements that have taken place are suggestive of an “America first” strategy. In the past few years, they have procured more than $8 billion-worth of contracts from the United States.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East and my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) both said, those procurements were not put out to contract; they were simply awarded. There were no competitions. We have the Apache contract and the P-8 contract—direct foreign military sales—and we have the scandalous situation of the airborne warning and control system, or AWACS, and I understand the Department is now going down the Wedgetail route. From talking to colleagues in NATO, I know that the Ministry of Defence has had no role, and nor is it interested, in partnering the programme that is replacing the 15 AWACS NATO aircraft. It is going down the Boeing route again. I am not sure whether soon we will have a sign at the Ministry of Defence’s Main Building saying, “Sponsored by Boeing”, but that seems to be the way it is going.

We also have the joint light tactical vehicle contract that was awarded to Oshkosh, with £1 billion of sales to replace armoured vehicles. There was no competition at all. At the same time, the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury are saying that the contract has to go out to competition. This is dangerous for our capability. It is not just about jobs, which are important, but about our supply chain and investment in research and development in our technology. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East will not remember the Falklands war, where we faced the issue of kit procurement from abroad. It reached a situation where we wanted to use the kit independently but were told that we could not.

I have serious concerns about this off-the-shelf approach to defence strategy, because there is no commitment at all. It would not happen in any other country—it would certainly not happen in the United States. If we were to sell equipment to the United States, there would have to be some offset in terms of jobs or investment there. This Government have not even tried. They trumpet the £100 million going into Lossiemouth, but that would have had to go anywhere. Boeing is going round on a public relations exercise, with glossy adverts that say it is now a British company, but it is not. There is very little evidence of real investment going into jobs and technology. That is not just today; our technology in this important sector is in long-term decline.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who is no longer in her place, said that there is no indication that the Treasury or the Ministry of Defence recognises that if a contract is awarded in this country, the money will come back straightaway. That is a serious problem for them. Short-term decisions taken now will have long-term implications for our effectiveness not just at maintaining our sovereign capability in a whole host of areas including shipbuilding, which has been outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East, but at maintaining our capability to use that kit in certain situations. For example, will we be able to get the upgrades on Apaches if a future US Government determine that we should not? That is why we need sovereign capability.

I hate to use the phrase “go back to basics”, but that is what the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence need to do. They need to make it clear that we need to procure and manufacture in the UK our sovereign capability, which should be the starting point for the defence industrial strategy. We have been promised it by the revolving door of Ministers for Defence Procurement, but it has never been put in place. It has to be a joined-up approach across Government that includes the prosperity agenda, which does not seem to matter when it comes to those huge contracts that have been awarded without competition. When there is a situation such as the fleet solid support ship contract, where we could have investment in UK jobs and prosperity, we put it out to foreign competition. My right hon. Friend the Member for Warley is right: no other nation in Europe would do such a thing.

John Spellar: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Kevan Jones: I am sorry; I am running out of time.

This scandal needs to be highlighted. I hope the Minister, in the time he has got in his new role, stands up to the knee-jerk “America first” reaction.

4.59 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on his superb oratory.

We are back here again: the same people are largely in the same chairs making the same arguments, although we have a different person in the Chair—you are very welcome, Mr Hollobone—and a different Defence Procurement Minister. I think he is the third since I was elected. We made effectively the same speeches to the previous Ministers, but he should not worry: these are good speeches with good arguments, and I am sure he will enjoy hearing them.

I think that we have a good Minister now. His freshness to defence means that he will bring a new approach to procurement decisions, and I hope that that will yield different results. We need different results, because our sovereign defence capability is at risk. I do not say that lightly, because I know that people who wish our country ill listen to these debates. We must present a strong and forthright position, and we must ensure that our military has the best equipment, the best training and, importantly, a supply chain and support structure that enables it to continue to operate at a high level. Russia is on the rise—it is increasing its threat to our country and making incursions into our airspace and waters—and China is growing its ambitions in the far east. The risk of state and non-state actors threatening the UK’s interests and those of our allies is high.

I will focus my remarks on the Royal Navy, about which much has been said. As the MP for Devonport, I would perhaps be expected to do that. The Royal Navy has suffered the greatest ill done to our sovereign defence capability. It could be said that that is also true of fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, and to Army equipment, but the Royal Navy has suffered the biggest impact. The shipyards that support our Royal Navy are not just
about concrete, steel, bricks and mortar; they are about the people and skills, which must be invested in and grown over time. We have had holes in our procurement exercises in the past because there has not been a constant stream of investment in our shipyards. Although we do not build ships in Devonport, we refit them, and we need a constant stream of ships to be refitted to ensure we keep up our skills. That is why it is so important to get the Type 26 and Type 31 right.

I congratulate the Government on what they have done in supporting the industry to sell the Type 26 overseas. I hope the Americans adopt the Type 26 as a platform for their future frigate procurement, which they are struggling with at the moment. The Type 31 is an example of what we need to get better at. There was great potential for it in the national shipbuilding strategy. We need more hulls that can do defence engagement work, station keeping, and the forward deployment roles that are so important in our Royal Navy, while maintaining the high-end capability of the Type 26.

As hon. Members know, I have a problem with calling a Type 31 a frigate. I would much prefer it to be a world-class corvette, rather than a rather poor frigate. I normally use more colourful language, but I will mind my p’s and q’s in this Chamber. We need to sell the Type 31 as the best in class. That would make our international allies want to buy it, rather than one of the plentiful array of small frigates and corvettes that are on the market. The Type 26 shows that people want to buy high-end British technology. The procurement delays and the disruption in the procurement process over the summer do not give us much confidence in the procurement of the Type 31s.

We also need to look ahead. Over the past year, since I and many others in this House were elected, we have been fighting to save HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. Other Members who would have been here if they had turned up might have claimed the success of the campaign to save those vital capabilities from being cut. Now that we have done that, we must ensure that we plan for suitable replacements for them. If Albion and Bulwark will go out of service in 2033 and 2034 respectively, we need a plan to build their replacements in UK shipyards. That is important, because it builds on the battle to ensure our Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships are built in UK shipyards, too.

We must maintain our sovereign defence capability to build such complex warships. I regard an RFA fleet solid support ship as a complex warship—the Government may stick it in a different column of their spreadsheet, but given that it has the roles and the capability of the RFA, I think it is a complex warship, and it should be built exclusively in UK shipyards.

Mr Sweeney: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I cannot stop the hon. Gentleman intervening, but, including his summary at the end, he will have had 26 minutes of a 60-minute debate. I have to call the Front Benchers at 5.7 pm.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said, those workers are highly skilled and sought-after. There are plenty of industries ready to snap them up if our defence industry does not have opportunities for them.
We must be able to operate independently, so our capability should not be linked to the foreign policy of a supplier, as the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) said. There are no guarantees that the UK will only ever conduct military operations that the US recognises and supports. We may have to—or wish to—operate independently.

The contracts for the fleet solid support ships have been problematic for a long time. The idea of putting them out to international competition is short-sighted and reflects our siloed thinking. We know that other Governments subsidise their shipbuilding industries, thus allowing bids to appear competitive, and effectively buying industrial contracts. I wrote to the Minister’s predecessor earlier this year about that. He responded:

“We are confident in the measures we have in place to ensure the integrity of the FSS procurement process, including measures to ensure it is conducted strictly in accordance with the EU rules on state aid. Although these rules do not apply to non-EU companies, the MOD will make no such distinction in their application and all bids will be judged against the same standards.”

I would like some assurance from the Minister that those measures are still in place.

Many nations have shipbuilding capability, including many small nations. Denmark has been able to build all nine of its frigates, three arctic patrol vessels and seven large patrol craft, all in Danish shipyards. The Norwegian navy’s fleet is built in Norwegian yards. We must have the ambition—beyond 2030—to build not just our frigates but our fleet support ships in yards here in the UK.

5.11 pm
Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I offer my warmest congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing such an important debate.

The defence industry is vital to the British economy, with a planned spend of £180 billion in the almost 10 years leading to 2026-27. That is a huge opportunity for the country’s economy, but one that has been lost because the Government have clearly rejected—despite their recent rhetoric—the idea of developing a sovereign capability for this country. Sadly, as we have heard this afternoon, the Government are increasingly buying kit off the shelf, principally from the United States of America. That is one reason why the Ministry of Defence has a deficit of £14.8 billion, according to the National Audit Office. Many MOD contracts are given without competition or openness, according to the single-source process, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made clear. The mechanised infantry vehicle contract was recently given to the Boxer without any competition or openness, and it seems that the AWACS replacement will go the same way.

Where there is competition, we see international tenders, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) highlighted with the example of fleet solid support ships. We will be up against tenders from state-subsidised shipyards throughout the world, particularly in Korea, so it is not a level playing field. We could be ensuring that British industry and shipyards benefit from the investment coming from those contracts, but what do we see? Recently there was the announcement that Babcock was going to close Appledore shipyard in Devon, at a loss of nearly 200 skilled jobs. That shipyard has been open since 1885 and has the proud record of producing 350 vessels, but this Government are allowing it to be shut through inactivity. As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) knows full well, nearly 300 workers at Cammell Laird are going to lose their jobs on the Mersey. There has also been a process of casualisation of the workforce, which will drive costs down but erode both employment and the skills of the workforce.

As the debate has demonstrated, we clearly need a sovereign industrial strategy for the defence industry. We need an industry that ensures a drumbeat of orders and provides jobs in all sectors of the defence economy, and as has been mentioned, we need to make particularly sure that our shipyards are fully provided with work and sufficient investment. We also need to think ahead and invest in technology as well as the skills of workers, and to be mindful of this country’s capacity to export, which sadly the Government are not.

I firmly believe that the shipyards and their workers should be at the very heart of this country’s industrial strategy. I believe that opportunities would present themselves if the Government decided, through the exercise of their political will, to bring forward a Type 31e frigate programme. If they decided, even at this late stage, to withdraw the international tender in order to ensure that the fleet solid support ships were built in British shipyards, there would be marvellous opportunities. That requires not just political will but an overarching perspective that looks beyond the short-term costs of the Ministry of Defence and instead at a holistic industrial strategy for the country, of which our industrial defence capability should be a central part.

In short, we need a Government who put the national interest first and do not look at pounds, shillings and pence in the short term, but have a long-term perspective that places British workers at the heart of an industrial strategy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. If the Minister could conclude his remarks no later than 5.27 pm, that would allow Mr Sweeney time to sum up. I call the Minister.

5.16 pm
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): Thank you very much, Mr Hollobone; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I too offer my congratulations to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for securing this important debate. I know that this is a matter close to his heart and an issue of great importance to him. I was somewhat depressed, however, by the fact that he said he will be 30 in January, given that I will be 47 next weekend, but there you go.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) wondered how long I would be in post, and I am afraid that is one question on which I am not prepared even to speculate. I hope that I have proved, in the few months I have been in the role, that I am prepared to listen to some and disagree with others—and will take the time to absorb all the information. That is why I have spent a lot of time going around the country to listen to industry, the people working within
it, and of course, the armed forces, to whom we are trying to supply important equipment. As the Minister, I am clearly responsible for procuring that equipment to ensure that we get the best value for our armed forces. It is also important to maintain the relationship with the UK industry and to promote exports and prosperity. Those issues are close to my heart. The debate has been informed by a clear recognition of the importance of the UK industry to our national security.

The debate has also given us an opportunity to remind ourselves of the extensive work that has already taken place to foster innovations and a competitive defence sector. The UK defence industry, working alongside our armed forces, plays a crucial role in delivering UK national security objectives. It is crucial to protect our people, project our influence around the world and promote national prosperity.

Every day since I took office, it has been a privilege to see the difference that the UK defence industry makes, whether that be the people, the equipment being provided, the training, the support, the infrastructure or the technology. Those elements are all there to help our nation’s defence. I think we are all proud to have a world-leading defence sector. The figures speak for themselves: in 2017 alone its turnover was £22 billion, with £9 billion of exports, and it supports over 140,000 jobs.

The report by my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) showed that defence plays an important part in our economy. It is crucial to strong manufacturing, technology and has a broad footprint in every corner of the United Kingdom. As a customer, we are always aware of the need to get the right capability for our armed forces, while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer. The key to that is a thriving and globally competitive defence sector that is an important part of a wider industrial base.

Helping that industry to grow and compete in a global market is a key objective of the defence industrial policy refresh that was published last year. The three strands to our approach are, first, to improve the way defence delivers wider economic and international value and national security objectives; secondly, to help industry be internationally competitive, innovative and secure; and thirdly, to ensure that it is easier to do business with the Ministry of Defence, which is an issue I have heard about particularly from small and medium-sized businesses.

We are committed to maximising value for the UK by taking into account potential economic impacts, strategic international interests and national security objectives. In the defence industrial policy refresh, we committed to a more systematic approach to considering prosperity and international and industrial security and ensuring that we are early in developing high-value business cases. Earlier, more holistic decisions will improve how we inform choices for military requirements and ensure that the acquisition strategy and commercial engagement support a full range of desired outcomes.

Hon. Members made a number of points; I will try to go through them all, but I suspect I will run out of time. If I do, I commit to write to each Member with an answer. First, I note the comment of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) about the merchant contract that was secured. If we can make our shipyards as competitive as possible across the globe, they will be more likely to secure more of those contracts. That is precisely why we have the national shipbuilding strategy.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), whose constituency I was pleased to visit, talked about the Type 26s. Hopefully America is listening. I had the privilege of being in America recently, where we tried to push the point he made. We need to push wherever we have the opportunities. We should recognise the successes we have had with Australia and Canada. There is still a bit of time to go, but we are working hard on that. I hope industry will be given the confidence to look for contracts all over the globe, so that we can provide security.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport asked for reassurance about state aid. The response that my predecessor gave her stands for the future contracts—I hope that reassures her. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who has left her place, mentioned tax and prosperity. We have to take into account the recently refreshed Treasury Green Book guidelines as part of our procurement process. The forward plan is exactly what the national shipbuilding strategy is about; it sets out the 30-year forecast of what the Royal Navy’s requirements will be, so we can give the industry the greater clarity it needs.

Appledore shipyard was an issue that arrived on my desk fairly early on. We engaged with Babcock and looked at all sorts of possibilities and options, but the timescales for the Type 31e and the FSS build would not have sustained the jobs at Appledore—or Cammell Laird, in fact.

Wayne David: The Minister mentioned the Type 31e. Let us not forget that the Government deliberately delayed the programme and put it out to tender again, having withdrawn the initial programme.

Stuart Andrew: There were issues with the start of the procurement process. We have reset that, and I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are sticking to delivery of the first one by the end of 2023. We have made that commitment; this is an ambitious project, and we are determined and working incredibly hard to ensure that we catch up any time that may have been lost. Each time I have updates, I get more optimistic about how we are progressing.

Many Members have talked about the FSS. It is not quite true to say that the Norwegians are building theirs—they are not, actually. They are being put out to international competition and are being built in South Korea. Australia and New Zealand have taken the same approach as us. We have been clear that a warship is as characterised in the national shipbuilding strategy.

Mr Kevan Jones: You are hardly making a warship, though.
Stuart Andrew: It is not a warship by definition, for the simple reason that the definition is based on the UK’s requirement to retain the ability to design, build and integrate frigates, destroyers and aircraft carriers for reasons of national security, ensuring that the complex nature of the construct is an important part of it from the very beginning. We will continue to have this argument—unions are coming to meet me very soon to discuss it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East again on securing the debate. I will constantly review this matter and take it on board, but the Ministry of Defence has made a decision. I assure him that we are doing everything we can to ensure that our industry, whether in maritime, on land or in the air, is there to compete on the global stage, to secure the jobs we need and the expertise we have in the UK.

5.28 pm

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for his reply and thank right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed so effectively to the debate. In reply to the Minister’s last remark about the need to maintain the UK’s sovereign capability to build complex warships being arbitrarily restricted to frigates, destroyers and aircraft carriers, the only reason we can build those ships in the UK today is that the last Labour Government placed an order for an auxiliary ship, the RFA Wave Ruler, at Govan shipyard in 1999, which enabled that yard to continue in operation. Also, there are five River class batch 2 patrol vessels being built at Govan to sustain production there until the Type 26 kicks in. By utilising those less complex, but none the less complex, warships to smooth the build cycle, we can retain the skills, infrastructure and critical mass we need to build complex warships including frigates, destroyers and aircraft carriers. We must look beyond that arbitrary restriction and maximise the purchasing power of the Ministry of Defence to deliver UK sovereign capability in the long term. We should broaden our horizons.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered UK sovereign capability.

5.29 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 21 November 2018

[STEWART HOSIE in the Chair]

Self-identification of Gender

9.30 am

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered proposals to allow self-identification of gender.

I thank you in advance for your chairmanship and guidance, Mr Hosie. Following our conversation earlier this morning, I am fully aware that this is a sensitive issue. I have concerns about self-identification of gender, but they are not in any way directed at anyone who is unfortunate enough to suffer from some form of gender dysphoria. I have met many trans women who share my concerns about this and want nothing to do with the kind of activism that seems to be going on and shutting down debate. The criticisms I have are of Government, Ministers and politically motivated organisations, many of which have access to public funds.

The law at the moment is that anyone who wishes to change their legal gender has to apply to the Gender Recognition Panel. They have to show a number of things, including that they have lived as their preferred gender for two years and have been diagnosed with some form of gender dysphoria. They also have to commit to living as their new gender for the rest of their life. One thing that they do not have to do is undergo any form of medical treatment or surgery. They do not even have to be taking any hormone pills. The vast majority of people who change gender maintain the body in which they are born. As far as I can find from the statistics, only one in five people who have changed gender have had any form of surgery. This is the cause of concern for many people.

Self-definition of gender is already happening. Organisations seem to be ahead of the law, which the Government may or may not be about to change. There is a particular concern about what is going on in schools with children. Guidance is being given to schools by publicly funded organisations such as Mermaids and others encouraging children to question their gender and redefine it if they wish. They can do so without their parents even being told about it. That can quickly set off a chain of events that can begin with children as young as 12 being given puberty blockers, about which there are many medical concerns. At least one doctor in my constituency has been giving these drugs out to children as young as 12. That can then progress on to irreversible surgery, because once one is on that pathway, it becomes difficult to get off it.

Teachers who have tried to question what is going on or who have fallen foul of the activist groups are liable to find themselves being disciplined. A teacher called Joshua Sutcliffe was disciplined by a school in Oxford for committing the offence—a new one on me—of misgendering a group of pupils. He had apparently said, “Well done, girls,” after a maths exam, although one of the girls identified as a boy. For that, the teacher was disciplined.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): That incident happened in my community. I would like to point out that how the hon. Gentleman is portraying the incident is far simpler than the bigger issues surrounding it. It was not just a single incident; there were a number of incidents with that teacher, not only in that specific case but in other parts of the school. I remind him that these things are sometimes over-simplified. Does he agree that over-simplification of such a sensitive and complex issue sometimes is not helpful?

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Lady is right, but if I over-simplify, it is partly so that she can have a chance to speak. We have only 90 minutes, and this is the first time we have debated the issue properly in the House of Commons. I look forward to hearing her longer explanation.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate to Parliament. It is such an important issue, and this is a great opportunity for us to have a respectful debate and discussion, but does he agree that as parliamentarians we have a duty not to over-simplify and to ensure that we properly educate ourselves to have an informed debate and discussion?

David T. C. Davies: Absolutely. That is why I have spent quite a lot of time talking to women who have concerns about the issue. Very few Members of Parliament have been willing to educate themselves and come along and meet people who have those concerns. It is notable that when we have had meetings in the House of Commons, very few people have turned up to listen to the concerns of activist feminist groups who feel that the potential change to the law will have a huge impact on their lives. I look forward to the hon. Lady’s support at future meetings we may have—we look forward to seeing her.

The Government are now considering legislation that would do away with the checks that are currently made and allow people to redefine themselves as any gender they wish. As far as I can see, that would mean that once the consultation has ended, if the Government do what the equal opportunities committee is recommending, people will be able to change their gender at any time. There would be no need to live outwardly as that gender, let alone to take hormones or have surgery. A 15-stone bearded man could simply define themselves as female and there would be nothing anyone could do to object. One might think that that does not matter—in fact, it does not, if that is what people want to do. I am a libertarian. I am a believer in freedom of choice. As far as I am concerned, it is absolutely fine, until it becomes an issue for other people and other people’s rights.

People who might outwardly appear to be male and possess a male body would, if they legally redefined their gender, suddenly gain access to women’s toilets, hospital wards, changing rooms, refuges and prisons. They would have the right to undertake roles that people would normally expect to be done by someone...
of the same sex as those the service is being offered to, such as nurses or carers conducting intimate procedures, prison or police officers carrying out searches or staff working in refuges for victims of domestic violence.

We saw an obvious example a few weeks ago of what can happen, and will happen more regularly, when a convicted male sex offender who had redefined himself as female was able to insist on his right to be put into a women’s prison. Within a matter of days, he had carried out four sexual assaults on women. Another example was given to me by someone who was the victim of long-term sexual abuse as a young person.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has cited a case and claimed that it proves that the Government should not change the law on gender recognition, yet that case, of which I do not know the detail, has happened under the current arrangements. Does that not actually point to a failure of risk assessment procedures, rather than a problem with the law?

David T. C. Davies: No, because as I said at the start, organisations such as prisons and schools are ahead of the law. They are already allowing self-identification of gender. There was certainly a failure of risk assessment with the case I mentioned. Shortly after it happened and the court case concluded, I asked the head of probation and prisons in Wales whether there had been any change to the guidance given to prison authorities about housing transgender prisoners, and I was told that there had not. I subsequently sought an urgent question about that, because, as I hope the hon. Lady would agree, it is appalling that vulnerable female prisoners, many of whom have been victims of male violence, are being put at risk in this fashion. It was not deemed important enough to be discussed in Parliament.

Layla Moran: The hon. Gentleman is gracious to give way to me for a second time. May I clarify whether his assertion is that prisons and schools are doing something illegal under the current Gender Recognition Act 2004?

David T. C. Davies: No, I have not asserted that at all. I have said that prisons and schools are allowing self-identification of gender at the moment. The law may well change shortly following the consultation, to give that a legal footing and to allow people to legally register their gender as being different from the one they are born with. The practicality is that that is already happening. I have made that point several times.

Hannah Bardell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T. C. Davies: Yes, but I am conscious that others may want to speak, and I do not want to use up all their time.

Hannah Bardell: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it seems strange to cite an example of a failure in the current system as a reason not to make improvements to the system? He mentioned women’s refuges. Linda Rodgers of Edinburgh Women’s Aid noted:

“The reality is that any service has the potential to be abused, and we would deal with that, whatever direction it came from on a case by case basis...I don’t think this should be used as a reason to restrict the rights of a particular group.”

Surely the hon. Gentleman recognises that we should not make policy on the basis of the incidents he mentions or of some individuals who may abuse the system. It should be about equality and fairness for everybody.

David T. C. Davies: Absolutely, but the point I am making is reasonable: if people are legally able to redefine their gender, the prison authorities, for example, will not be able to prevent a male who has redefined their gender from going to a female prison. That is already happening and is bound to become a lot easier.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

David T. C. Davies: Perhaps one last time. I will be guided by you, Mr Hosie.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): There is plenty of time.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman appears to argue that women prisoners need protection only from trans women. In fact, we need to protect all prisoners from a range of potential hazards, and such things should be applied on the basis of individual cases, not on the basis of someone’s gender identification. How can he argue that a risk assessment should not apply equally? It could apply to other women, not only to trans women.

David T. C. Davies: It could, but the reality is that the vast majority of sexual assaults are carried out by males against females. I am told that the figure is higher than 90%, and I believe that. On extraordinarily rare occasions, women assault males, but let us be honest, it is very unusual. If we allow people who have been convicted of sexual offences as males to redefine their gender and insist on their right to go into female prisons, we will clearly put women at risk. I do not see how anyone can fault the logic of that. We have already seen what can happen when that goes on.

The other example I want to give is of somebody who has been involved in speaking out on this issue. She has been a victim of long-term sexual abuse and was helped by a women’s organisation in the south of England. I will not go into the detail of what went on, but it was horrendous. She told me that there is absolutely no way she would have been able to access that service from anyone who was male, or have anything to do with that organisation if anyone male was there. She has subsequently been told that anyone who defines themselves as female will be able to use the service and be part of the group that helps women who have been victims of sexual abuse. Because of that, she would not have accessed that service today. There are many other women in the same situation.

My point is that even before any legislation has been passed, we are already seeing organisations such as schools, hospitals and prisons allowing people to define themselves as a different gender from the one that they were born with, and to which in the majority of cases their body corresponds. That has an impact on others, and particularly on the right of women to privacy and to sex-segregated spaces.

One issue that particularly concerns me is the lack of debate that has gone on. I am grateful for the fact that we are able to have this debate here today. Although groups in receipt of public funds, such as Mermaids, seem to have an open door to Government and Select
Committees, anyone who expresses concern about this matter is ignored. PinkNews seems to have abandoned any pretence at objective reporting and vilifies women’s and very often the M25, who have a different opinion. I say to the Minister, with all due respect, that I have supported the Government through deeds of that they have done, often in difficult circumstances, but I will not support the Government on this issue. Not only will I not support them if they go ahead with what I think they are planning, but I will do my utmost, in so far as I can, to stop any changes in legislation going ahead that will undermine the safety of women and change our society in ways that are very concerning.

I arranged a meeting in Parliament for a women’s group after a venue in London, at Millwall football club, had been cancelled. Numerous complaints were made to the House of Commons authorities before the meeting, and I was called into a meeting with the Serjeant at Arms. As the Minister knows, I have been an MP for 13 years and, like most MPs, I have organised numerous meetings for numerous groups. I have never before had to go and spend an hour with the Serjeant at Arms explaining myself. I have no problem with the conversation that we had, but it is very unusual for that to happen.

I tried to organise another meeting afterwards. Again, I was contacted by the Serjeant at Arms’ office. After the meeting took place, numerous complaints were made, mostly vexatious, but they resulted in a three-month investigation by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Again, I have no problem with that and with the conclusion that she reached, but such investigations are not unknown. I was even told by another Member of Parliament that I could face police action because of what had taken place, because of the potential that a public order offence had been committed. This matter is one for debate, such as the one we are having now. We have a right to discuss these issues. If people know that meetings will result in investigations and legal action against them, even if it amounts to nothing, they will obviously be far less inclined to hold them.

The Government, whom I support by and large, are proposing fundamental changes that will have a huge impact on people. That is being done without proper consideration and in an atmosphere of menace. Many people are deeply concerned by what is going on. I urge Ministers and members of the relevant Select Committees to listen to the concerns and to meet some of the groups that are concerned about what is going on, rather than ignoring them, which I am afraid is what happens at the moment. Some organisations seem to have an open door into the offices of Ministers of Government, but others—[ Interruption. ] The Minister shakes her head, but perhaps she can tell me how many times Ministers have met Transgender Trend or Woman’s Place and how many times they have met Mermaids or other pro-trans activist groups.

People should not face dismissal from their jobs for suggesting that a woman cannot have a penis. It may be an issue about which we can have different opinions, but it is certainly a debatable point at the very least. Nor should they face dismissal for the so-called offence of “misgendering”.

Women who want safe same-sex spaces are not transphobic and are not committing hate crimes. They are simply reflecting a concern for their own safety, which, as a man, I have to say is based on a valid fear for far too many. I hope the Government will stop listening to some of the activist organisations and start listening to people, very often outside the M25, who have a different opinion. I say to the Minister, with all due respect, that I have supported the Government through thick and thin, as she knows, often in difficult circumstances, but I will not support the Government on this issue. Not only will I not support them if they go ahead with what I think they are planning, but I will do my utmost, in so far as I can, to stop any changes in legislation going ahead that will undermine the safety of women and change our society in ways that are very concerning.

9.47 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) on securing this debate. Although we are perhaps on opposite sides on some of the issues, I agree absolutely that not enough debate has been had in this House on this matter.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate today, especially because it is Trans Awareness Week. Yesterday was the Transgender Day of Remembrance, a day when we are meant to remember the huge inequalities and the number of transgender people who have died over the years because of the oppression that they faced. I hope the Minister will join me today in solidarity with the community that over the past few months has had inordinate amounts of abuse hurled at it from all quarters. However, today is an opportunity to shed some light rather than heat on this debate, particularly on the issues that underpin some of that heat.

I want to place on the record my thanks to my Liberal Democrat colleague and friend, Helen Belcher, whom I have worked with closely on this matter. I also want to place it on the record that I am wholeheartedly behind the Government’s proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. I believe that they are proportionate and well thought through. It is time that Britain caught up with many other countries around the world—a point I will come to later.

That said, I absolutely appreciate the sincerely held concerns of not just the hon. Gentleman but many other people, including constituents who have contacted me to say that they are worried about aspects of the proposals. My constituent Juliette said:

“It is a damning indictment on not just us, although we politicians need to take responsibility for shying away from what is a controversial and sensitive issue, but on the media, which I do not believe have treated the issue with fairness on either side. In today’s debate and moving forward, we need to try to bring the two sides together, because I do not think there is a conflict between being a feminist and believing in trans rights.

Since my election in 2017, I have ensured that Ministers are aware of my constituents’ views on both sides of the debate. I particularly thank the Minister’s colleague in the other place, Baroness Williams of Trafford, for
taking the time to meet me to discuss the issues. I have not attended the meetings organised by the hon. Member for Monmouth simply because I have been listening to my constituents and working on the issue in other ways. I take slight offence at the insinuation that because I have not attended his meetings I do not care deeply about the issue and have not been engaging in the debate.

I appreciate that Ministers are considering responses to the public consultation, but it would be encouraging to hear from the Minister about what steps the Government are taking to reassure people who are worried about the reform, and what active myth-busting is occurring, or is planned, regarding the misconceptions. That will be the crux of my speech.

It is important to put self-identification and self-declaration in the context of the Equality Act 2010. If we understand what that legislation allows, we can then talk about how the law might be reformed or changed. The Act protects people from discrimination on the basis of sex and gender reassignment, and describes the exemptions that allow single-sex spaces. Under the Act, it is a legitimate aim to provide safe spaces for women, but it is not proportionate to exclude all trans women from those spaces simply because they are trans, which is an incredibly important point. Furthermore, the Act protects those who have undergone, are undergoing, or are proposing to undergo a process, or part of a process, of reassigning their gender.

It is probably worth mentioning the sorts of interventions and operations that some trans people choose not to have. First, that is their medical choice to make. Secondly, think for a moment of the extensive operations that would need to happen. Many trans people are put off thinking for a moment of the extensive operations that some trans people choose not to undergo. It is about who they are, how they make decisions, and how they want to live as a person. It is about who they are and how they see someone in their soul and as a human body. I see someone in their soul and as a human body. I do not really care whether they have a male body or a female body. I believe that women are women, so if that person was a trans woman, I absolutely would. I do not want to take more interventions earlier, but my question to him would be: are we saying that we want to roll back the 2010 Act in the reforms? Allowing trans women into women-only spaces is provided for under that Act. If that is what is being questioned, it is a rolling back of the Act, and not a reform.

Let us think about what would happen if a man did self-declare as a woman using any of the gender recognition reform proposals, and then tried to enter a women-only space for nefarious purposes. This chap is so intent on doing that that he gets himself a new birth certificate. By the way, it is a fallacy that people can just say, “Oh, I’m going to decide this afternoon to change my gender.” Nothing in the reforms suggests that someone can just decide to do that on a whim one afternoon, or say, “In the morning I’m going to be a woman and in the afternoon I’m going to be a man,” or anything like that.

The proposed reforms are proportionate and considered. They are not knee-jerk and they understand that such decisions are some of the most personal that a human gets to make. It is about who they are and how they fundamentally identify. It is not something that people do lightly. However, let us say that someone did want to do that.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Lady is setting out a hypothetical situation, but a number of countries already have simple self-declaration administrative processes for gender recognition: Argentina, Denmark, Ireland, Malta, Norway and Colombia. Is she aware of Government single-sex service providers or criminal justice sectors in those countries reporting negative impacts from that implementation?

Layla Moran: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, because as far as I am aware there are none. A lot of the concern comes from hypotheticals, anecdotes, and often very simplified versions of much more complex events. As a former science teacher, I care a lot about the evidence. What is the evidence about what has happened? It will return to the hon. Lady’s point, which was very well made, in a moment.

Let us assume that someone wants to go into a women-only space for nefarious purposes. That would be quite a stupid thing to do because, apart from anything else, if an offence was committed it would show evidence of premeditation, which would increase the person’s sentence. Also, had the certificate been gained for the sole purpose of entering such a space to commit a crime, that would be a separate crime under
the Fraud Act 2006. If someone was intent on harming women, that would be one of the stupider ways of doing it.

Quite apart from that, it is a hypothetical situation that is removed from what the evidence shows. There is no evidence at all to show such harms in countries such as Malta and Norway over the past few years. Importantly, because of how the Equality Act works, we do not even have to look further afield—just look at this country, where the Act already allows self-identification for those who are even considering going through the process. What evidence is there from this country of any problems with self-declaration, which has been going for eight years now? There is none.

This has the signs of a moral panic being whipped up to demonise a community. I am not saying that my constituents are doing that, but there are some people who are intent on rolling back the Equality Act, and I am deeply concerned that they are not being called out for wanting to do so.

**Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab):** Does the hon. Lady share my concern that when the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) cited violence against women, he was conflating two issues? Violence against women is mainly carried out by men; as the hon. Lady rightly points out, it has nothing to do with trans women. Moreover, trans rights are human rights. The need to protect women from men who sexually abuse them is absolutely right, but being a feminist and being a supporter of trans rights are not in conflict; the two can absolutely sit together. We need to look at the evidence, not just about what the law currently says, but—

**Layla Moran:** I absolutely agree. Our laws were groundbreaking when they were introduced in 2004, but our law on gender recognition now lags behind those of other countries. It disadvantages trans people on some very questionable grounds.

I am not sure on what basis the people who raise concerns about gender recognition feel that it is wrong. It is one of our values that there should be a level playing field in our society. Society is evolving and becoming more complex, and we are rightly recognising more intricate parts of it.

It is incumbent on us as British politicians to protect minority groups and understand the issues that they face. The reforms are a logical next step in our evolving understanding of a very small and vulnerable group of people in this country. Yes, many are children when they first start to discover the situation, but as a former teacher and as the Lib Dem education spokesperson, I believe that schools are doing their utmost to make children feel that it is okay to be different and have a space in which they can discuss the issues. To suggest that that extends to encouraging them to change their gender is a step too far for the role of schools.

I am pleased to support the reforms of the Gender Recognition Act, as well as maintaining my support for women-only services, which remain vital for many. The points made about violence against women and about the need to protect women from men who sexually abuse them are absolutely right, but being a feminist and being a supporter of trans rights are not in conflict; the two can absolutely sit together. We need to look at the evidence, not just about what the law currently says, but—

**David T. C. Davies:** The hon. Lady says that she supports women-only services. By “women-only”, does she mean anyone who defines themselves as a woman?

**Layla Moran:** The hon. Gentleman brings me on to my next sentence. I was about to say that these changes are necessary for women. Moreover, trans rights are human rights.

I am very grateful for today’s debate, because it has allowed some of us to broaden and deepen the debate and to start to set the record straight.

10.6 am

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), who raised a number of issues. It is important that the debate remains respectful and that we can have a reasonable and decent conversation. I commend the UK and Scottish Governments on their consultations. The Scottish Government consultation received a huge number of responses, more than 60% of which were in favour of the proposals.

On a number of occasions, the hon. Gentleman spoke in over-simplified terms. I must repeat what I said in my intervention: that is not helpful because deepening and expanding the debate about these concerns is vital. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) made an excellent speech. I greatly share her concerns about rolling back on the Equality Act. As her hypothetical example highlighted perfectly, we have to remember that what is essentially identity fraud would
be a crime. The fact that 93% of people in the trans community have sought to get support and access services but have been turned away is a shame and a stain on our society.

Yesterday was the Transgender Day of Remembrance—a day when we took a moment to celebrate the incredible contribution that trans people make to our communities, and to reflect and remember our trans siblings who have been killed, committed suicide, faced prejudice or not been able to live or be recognised in a way of their choosing. I firmly believe that today’s debate is about exactly that: living in a way of our choosing, without fear or prejudice, under a legislative framework that supports people to do exactly that.

I started school in the year section 28 was introduced. Section 28 meant that schools and teachers could not talk to students openly about their sexual orientation or gender identity without fear of losing their jobs. So much legislation related to LGBTI rights has been, and still is, based on fear rather than acceptance, but we have come a long way in all parts of the UK. I commend the Minister and her Government on their work, as well as the other Governments around the UK—particularly the Scottish Government, who have gone a little bit further. I hope that at some point the Minister and I can meet to discuss how scrapping the spousal veto in Scotland has meant greater equality for trans people.

Section 28 was scrapped in 2003. By then I was halfway through my university degree. I grew up believing that, if I came out, I could not live a normal life and I would not have equal rights. I am an ardent feminist and an openly gay MP. I am not about to shut the door on the equality of trans people just because people like me now have greater equality. Those of us in the LGBTI+ community, and all of us who believe in equality and enjoy greater equality, must do all that we can to support others who are marginalised and discriminated against. Although the legislation on gender recognition was groundbreaking in 2004, it is now out of date. Medicalising and marginalising people who are trans is absolutely wrong.

We recently celebrated a new chapter in Scotland for LGBTI people. Inclusive education has become a reality—the UK Government are also working on that. I want to take a moment to recognise Liam Stevenson and Jordon Daly from Time for Inclusive Education, plus all the many organisations that have supported us with their briefings today, including Stonewall Scotland, LGBT Youth Scotland and the Scottish Trans Alliance, which worked on the legislation and policies in Scotland alongside John Swinney, Angela Constance and Christina McKelvie.

I appreciate that sexuality and gender identity are two very different things, but I faced challenges in terms of coming to my sexuality. I did not come out until I was 32. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for somebody who is trans who is trying to operate in a system where their transition is medicalised, where they have to travel hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles—as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned, many trans people feel that going abroad is their only choice.

I have met a number of young trans people in my Livingston constituency, some pre-op, some post-op. The challenges they have faced are truly heartbreaking. Even in Scotland, which came second top in inclusiveness on the LGBTI global index, we still have a significant way to go. Living in a country and society where someone’s orientation or identity does not have legal recognition, and where they do not have equal rights, is corrosive to the soul. At the core is the need to reform the legislation—changing our societal view and structures will follow from changing the law on gender recognition.

I recognise that the debate has become very polarised, which is a source of great sadness to me. I do not think it helps when the media sensationalise. There are cases where systems are being abused, and we must recognise and address those concerns, but we must not make policy based on a few individuals who seek to abuse the system. There will always be those who seek to abuse the system. That is regrettable and those people should be dealt with appropriately, but we should not make policy on that basis.

Danielle Rowley: As the hon. Lady has rightly pointed out, a small minority would seek to cause others harm. However, more than half of trans people in the UK have attempted suicide and 84% have said that they have experienced suicidal thoughts. Does the hon. Lady agree that a lot more needs to be done to protect and support them?

Hannah Bardell: I could not agree more. The hon. Lady makes a very powerful point. It is a stain on our society that many trans people feel so marginalised. In this debate and in the wider discussion, we must do all that we can to raise our voices to show our support and ensure that our policies and our laws properly support and recognise them.

The Scottish Government consultation on reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004 ran from 9 November 2017 to 1 March 2018. There were 15,697 responses and 60% of respondents were in support of the Government’s proposals. It is important to recognise and understand why 40% were not in favour, but those are the figures none the less.

The hon. Member for Monmouth raised a number of concerns about domestic violence and women’s services. I have a few quotes from organisations in Scotland for him. The chief executive of Rape Crisis Scotland, Sandy Brindley, said that the most important thing to say was that the proposed legal changes “should make no difference to the provision of women-only services—that’s where some confusion has arisen. There isn’t any Rape Crisis which would ask to see documentation of gender.” I mentioned Linda Rodgers of Edinburgh Women’s Aid, who said that “there are concerns out there that our service could in some way be abused” by allowing people to self-declare their gender. She said she had not heard that from the organisation’s staff or board. She continued: “The reality is that any service has the potential to be abused, and we would deal with that, whatever direction it came from on a case by case basis. I don’t think this should be used as a reason to restrict the rights of a particular group.”

Many people are concerned about young people. Stonewall has said that accessing legal recognition would have a hugely positive impact on trans young people’s health and experience in education. Like all young people, trans young people get on better at school and...
college when they are supported to be themselves, which is particularly important given the alarming rates of transphobic bullying happening in Britain’s schools and the impact that that has on trans young people’s mental health. Lowering the age at which young people can obtain legal recognition would also raise awareness of trans young people’s needs and support schools and colleges to address the misconceptions and stereotypes that fuel transphobic bullying.

Stonewall provided a case study from a woman called Susan:

“My daughter deserves to have the legal status and identity that matches who she is. I don’t understand why people can’t accept that everyone has a right to live their life being true to themselves, as long as it doesn’t break the law or impact negatively on anyone else.”

Earlier in the year, I visited Malawi and met a number of trans activists and heard their stories. They live in a country where it is illegal not just to be trans, but to be gay. Trans people have no legal standing in that country. One of the activists had been attacked in their workplace purely on the basis of being trans. They went to the police, and were told to go home, dress in their proper identity and come back – only then would the crime be recorded. That is a world away from where we are. The mental and physical toll on those activists was terrifying.

We absolutely have to recognise that changing gender is not something that anybody would do lightly. Should it be done for nefarious reasons, it would be very rare and should be dealt with appropriately.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. She said that the experience in Malawi is a world away. Sadly, 41% of trans people have experienced a hate crime in the past year. I know from talking to some of my trans constituents that that is consistent with their experience. In reality, do trans women not need precisely the same protection from male violence and access to safe spaces that other women need?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree.

I hope the hon. Member for Monmouth and others who have concerns will be reassured by the fact that women’s groups such as Rape Crisis Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid, Zero Tolerance, Engender, Equate Scotland, Close the Gap and the Women 50:50 campaign have come out in support of the proposed changes in Scotland, as have their equivalent organisations in the UK. We must acknowledging that there are concerns and we must address them, but we absolutely must hold a mirror up to those who are marginalising and attacking trans people and their rights. There is a groundswell of support for equality and for a change in the law to ensure that gender identification and the processes that trans people have to go through are not discriminatory at their core. We absolutely must change the law to ensure that they are properly supported, that the law reflects that and that our society reflects that.

10.19 am

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for bringing the debate to the House. It is absolutely right to say that we need to have this discussion. It should have happened sooner—if it had, maybe the void that was created would not have been filled with such hostility.

As many Members have recognised, yesterday was the Transgender Day of Remembrance. I want to reflect on the 369 reported killings of trans and gender-diverse people—one was in the UK—between 1 October 2017 and September this year. I also want to reflect on the number of trans people who, as we have heard, have considered taking their own life, especially students.

It is important that what is discussed in the House is accurate and sensitive. I feel that some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Monmouth were not as sensitive as they could have been. We have to remember that people who are transitioning will be watching this debate, and that we are decision makers and lawmakers. They will be looking at how we address this issue.

David T. C. Davies: It certainly was not my intention to cause any offence to anyone who is trans or otherwise. Perhaps the hon. Lady will educate me a little by explaining which of my comments she thought was insensitive.

Dawn Butler: You made a comment about people who are “unfortunate enough” to suffer from gender dysphoria. That has very negative connotations, just as it used to be said that people were “unfortunate enough” to be gay, to be a woman or to be black. The way you speak was picked up in your talking about simplifying—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Please use the correct terminology.

Dawn Butler: Sorry, Mr Hosie. The hon. Member for Monmouth simplified cases to sensationalise them, which is unnecessary for this kind of debate.

David T. C. Davies: It was not my intention to cause any offence to anyone who is trans; I have tried to make that clear throughout. My understanding is that gender dysphoria is a medical condition that must be diagnosed. I suggest that, if somebody has gender dysphoria and is unhappy with their gender, that might be an unfortunate situation to be in. By saying that, I am certainly not trying to undermine the rights of anyone who is transgender.

Dawn Butler: I am sure the hon. Gentleman’s comments will slightly reassure the transgender community. The UK’s legislation is so out of date that we are no longer considered a world leader on LGBT+ rights. We were once No. 1—right at the very top. We slipped to third, and we are fourth in this year’s rankings. The International Lesbian and Gay Association’s “Rainbow Europe index” report cites a surge in transphobic media coverage as the reason for our falling down that league table.

The Labour party has a proud record of championing equal rights, including LGBT+ rights. It was a Labour Government who brought in the Equality Act 2010 and the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and who abolished section 28 and created civil partnerships. We need to recognise that LGBT+ people still face widespread discrimination, and it is clear that we must do more to enhance their rights and protections. The Gender Recognition Act 2004 is now out of date and needs amending. The issue is about changing sex and gender on birth certificates, and we should talk about the facts.

Apart from birth certificates, it is already possible to change one’s name, title and gender marker on all UK identity documents. That has been working well for more than 40 years. In fact, most trans people do not
want to go through the indignity of applying for a gender recognition certificate. The Government will have the support of Opposition Members to amend the Gender Recognition Act 2004.

I will go through a few more facts. Deliberately making a false statutory declaration is a serious crime and is punishable by imprisonment. From the heartfelt contributions that we have heard, we know that changing one’s gender is not done lightly. Reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 does not affect access to single-sex services and facilities, which has been made clear.

Layla Moran: On the issue of prisons, can the hon. Lady confirm that very high-risk trans women are sometimes not held on the female estate because there are no facilities to house them? Depending on a risk assessment, they are sometimes even held in male prisons. That goes to show that the current system already works: if somebody is considered a high risk to the exclusively female population, the system and guidelines already provide for that.

Dawn Butler: That is absolutely correct. In the case that was mentioned, there was a failure of the prison authorities, not of the system. The process should have gone through certain panels before the decision was made—it had nothing to do with the principles of the Equality Act 2010. We have good information that a transgender expert who consulted on that particular case was overruled. The failure of Leeds prison authorities to act on the expert’s advice arises from the reaction to Vikki Thompson’s tragic suicide in Leeds, which is maybe why that particular case happened. It was a failure not of the system but of the prison authorities.

Labour recognises the rights of all groups to debate the implications of reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004. All views should be listened to and supported, and we have listened to various groups that have vastly different opinions. That does not mean that we will be bullied into taking one side or the other. Decisions and law should be made on the basis of facts and take into consideration the majority, not just people who are sensationalising certain aspects of a particular case. As I have said, with 45% of trans students attempting suicide, the Government’s delay in amending the Gender Recognition Act 2004 has contributed to fraught and toxic debate, from which I hope we can move on.

I have a few questions for the Minister, which I am sure she will appreciate. Will she outline the Government’s planned timetable for reforming the Gender Recognition Act 2004, including the publication of their response to the recently closed consultation? Will she outline the Government’s plans to launch their separate calls for evidence on issues faced by non-binary and intersex people, and can she confirm that this will not delay the much-needed reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004? In line with the LGBT action plan, will she provide an update on research on the feasibility of the “Tell Us Once” service as a sustainable model for trans people to update their name and gender only once across multiple Departments? I am sure this is the case, but just for clarification, will the Minister confirm that trans people will not lose any rights under the Gender Recognition Act reforms?

I will conclude by quoting a letter from a Labour activist, Heather Peto, but before I do so I want to thank the organisations that fed the views in to us, including Unison, Stonewall, DIVA magazine, my LGBT advisory panel, LGBT Labour and our parliamentary Labour party LGBT group. When we make legislation in this place, it is important that we listen to people’s lived experiences. For too long, laws have been made for people, about people, without their having a place around the table.

Danielle Rowley: I spoke to a young trans woman who found herself homeless. She told me that she had been put into an all-men hostel and was scared for her life. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must make law to protect all women, and that must absolutely include trans women?

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Trans women suffer from abuse, violence, domestic abuse and assault in the streets, just as every other woman does. We need to recognise the intersectionality of women, including trans women; we often do not. Often, only some women are recognised and have a privileged position.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady has made an excellent contribution. I just want to share with hon. Members an excerpt from Baroness Helena Kennedy’s excellent book, “Eve Was Shamed”, about the experience of trans prisoners, which illustrates the hon. Lady’s point excellently:

“One of the most distressing cases I ever conducted was defending a young transgender woman who had been raped and vaginally damaged by a former partner. She had gone to the police and reported the violation only to be greeted with ridicule, asides and suppressed laughter. The case pre-dated the Human Rights Act and reforms in rape law and the Equality Act. Her experience at the hands of the police was so wretched that she decided to withdraw the allegation whereupon the police charged her with perverting the course of justice.”

That was a long time ago and things have moved on, but such cases still show that there must be no rolling back of rights.

Dawn Butler: I thank my hon. Friend—I will refer to her in that way—for that intervention. That feeds nicely into the letter from Heather, who has been trans for many decades. She said:

“Not so long ago, I was assaulted in a club when a stranger came over and roughly grabbed my crotch and breasts ‘to see if I was a woman’. I would call that sexual assault, but the police with stretched resources gave it low priority as it was a ‘lad having a laugh when drunk’. Being pushed over and abused in the street has also become common place again. When it happens now, myself and other trans people have to weigh whether it is worth reporting it to the police at all. Is your indignity worth the time it takes to go through all the police processes, the triggering of old memories of being sexually assaulted and the police’s lack of concern? For the more minor assaults usually it isn’t, but for the rapes and domestic violence support it is, and transwomen need support and safe spaces just as other women do.”

10.33 am

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for securing this debate and enabling...
us to have this conversation about a very important area of our society in the 21st century. A lot of us are feeling our way in it.

I thank all hon. Members for the respectful tone in which they conducted the debate. I get asked about this issue regularly, and we all share a sense of sadness about the fact that this important debate sometimes gets taken over by loud and sometimes aggressive campaigning by activists. I am sure they hold their beliefs very strongly, but they perhaps lose sight of the fact that we have to be able to talk about this issue in a reasoned, respectful and caring fashion. The vast majority of the public—and, I am sure, parliamentarians—are in the middle. We want to talk about this issue in a caring and careful way so society gets to a position in which we are all comfortable with the consequences of the changes to legislation and so on.

There is perhaps a lack of understanding, so we need to help schools and the other organisations that have been mentioned to understand what the law is so they can apply it confidently in their services. I take that away not just from this debate but from the discussions we have more generally. We have tended to focus on trans women, but of course this debate also involves trans men, which I will deal with towards the end of my speech.

The consultation closed on 22 October. I hope that those who looked at it noted that the questions were very open. We deliberately tried not to lead people down a particular path because we wanted to ensure that we heard a range of views from as many people as possible to see how the current system is working. This debate is about self-identification, but no decisions have been made yet about what if any changes will be made to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. The consultation was about seeking views, so people should not walk away with the idea that we have made up our mind. It is only a couple of weeks since the consultation closed, so no proposals have been put forward about self-identification or other ways in which we can deal with the Act.

The consultation ran for 16 weeks and received more than 100,000 responses, which shows the interest that this topic attracts. My hard-working civil servants are now analysing those responses. In response to the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), we hope to have a Government response to the consultation ready in spring next year. She will appreciate that it takes a bit of time to work through 100,000 responses. We also want to ensure that we get the right response, in which we will set out the next steps.

The hon. Lady also asked about calls for evidence regarding intersex and non-binary people. We will publish the call for evidence shortly, and it will not cause delay to the response to the overall consultation. She also asked about the “Tell Us Once” service. Work is ongoing in the Government Equalities Office to deliver that commitment in the action plan.

The hon. Lady asked about trans people’s rights. Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth for securing this debate, because it gives me the opportunity to say that there will be no loss of trans people’s rights. This is an open consultation to determine what the law should be and explore people’s thoughts about its application in the 21st century.

I understand that my hon. Friend is concerned that the views of women and women’s groups have not been heard in the consultation. I reassure him that the Government are committed to hearing from everyone, including the groups he mentioned. We do not want to close down the debate. We absolutely do not agree with those who seek to stifle the views of people who do not agree with them. I, for one, have been on the record for some time as having grave concerns about the development of things such as no-platforming in our universities. It seems to me that we should have the confidence to talk about this issue, to express our concerns, to ask questions and to do so in a way that is met with respect so our questions are answered.

David T. C. Davies: The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), said that Labour fully supports debate. The Minister has just said the same. Do they both support local authorities—Conservative and Labour—in allowing groups such as Woman’s Place UK and Transgender Trend to hold meetings in local authority buildings?

Victoria Atkins: I take the view that we have the principle of freedom of speech. We should have a debate as long as it does not go beyond the legal markers delineating hate crime and so on. People are sometimes almost too scared to talk about things, which is not right. We do not want a climate of fear in the debate. We want people to be able to express their views respectfully and in a caring and careful manner, so that we ensure that questions are flushed out and answered.

The people whom my officials have met represent what I call the “rainbow full of views”—the spectrum of views on the topic. My officials have met women’s groups, those who run and administer refuges, domestic abuse charities, local government, LGBT groups, unions, service providers, transgender charities, Government Departments, European Governments, and organisations who campaign against reform of the Gender Recognition Act, including Fair Play For Women, Woman’s Place UK and Transgender Trend. They have also met feminist organisations that support reform of the GRA, because our priority with the consultation has been openness and listening.

As the Government consider the options, there are a couple of points I will make clear. Since the Gender Recognition Act came into force, transgender people have been able to acquire a new birth certificate matching the gender they live in. Experience has shown, however, that some do not use the process because they find it to be difficult and intrusive. They are therefore left with a birth certificate that does not reflect the gender in which they live their lives. Without a new birth certificate, transgender people are unable to marry in the gender in which they live their lives, and cannot claim their pensions at the age appropriate to that gender. Those who are a little older live with the worry that their death certificate might carry a name and a gender that have not applied to them for decades. That is one of many reasons for the consultation.

For a transgender person, changing their birth certificate requires them to obtain a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria; to obtain a second report from a medical professional detailing any medical treatment that they have had, such as hormone treatment or surgery; to sign a statutory declaration that they intend to live in their acquired gender until death; to provide proof of having lived for at least two years in their acquired gender; to
pay a fee of £140; and, if they are married, to obtain the consent of their spouse. That documentation is sent to the Gender Recognition Panel, which is used to obtain a new birth certificate. The transgender person never meets the panel that makes that decision about them.

When the UK Government introduced the 2004 Act, it was world leading, as the hon. Member for Brent Central mentioned. We feel that the time is right to ask whether it is still appropriate and whether it needs improving. We have head from 100,000 people and from colleagues across the House.

Dawn Butler: Does the Minister agree that it is cruel not only that a transgender person does not meet the Gender Recognition Panel, but that they have no right of appeal?

Victoria Atkins: That point was raised in the consultation.

Hannah Bardell: The Minister’s point about the time being right is important. She mentioned a number of organisations that she has met, but I am concerned that some organisations suggest that gender identification is a trend. To me, that is deeply offensive, because it is akin to somebody telling me that my sexuality is a trend, which I absolutely refute in the strongest terms. In reality, trans people across the UK face murder, homelessness and violence. It is important that we change the law as soon as possible.

Victoria Atkins: I am about to move on to something that the hon. Lady spoke about in her speech. She may not know but I have said on record that I would never dream of using the word “trend” in this context, because its use risks demeaning or minimising the journeys that people are on or have been on. To my mind, that comes back to the point about being caring and careful in the way that we discuss the issue. If I may correct her for the record: the organisations I listed have met my officials.

Layla Moran: I want to relay the story of a friend of mine whose spouse was asked to provide that certificate and found it deeply concerning. Their feeling was, “Who am I to stop my partner from defining who they are?” In fact, it stopped them from going through the process. Does the Minister agree that that is problematic and can she confirm that it is being looked at?

Victoria Atkins: We will look at the matter of spousal consent and those responses as part of the consultation.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) gave a moving account of her personal experience, and other colleagues have given accounts of the experiences of people who have been on, or are on, their journeys, and the challenges, or sometimes the heartbreak, that they face. I know from conversations that I have had with trans people that there is often a great deal of sadness in the process of coming to a decision. That is not necessarily their own sadness, but can be the sadness of those around them. I am very conscious of the experiences of people who have been through that and, for me, the key words on the issue are “caring” and “careful”.

I say “careful” because of some of the concerns expressed today. I absolutely understand those who expressed them—for example, about women’s refuges. As a Home Office Minister, I will take the draft domestic abuse Bill through Parliament in the coming months. I know people are concerned that refuges will no longer be able to provide safe spaces for women. May I please make it clear that that is not the case?

Domestic abuse services, including refuges, have robust risk assessment procedures and may exclude anyone who might threaten a safe environment for victims and their children, as well as signposting sources of support for those people whose needs they might not be able to meet. I am very conscious from my conversations with refuge organisations that they take different approaches, which I welcome. We have to be in a situation in which we can offer support and refuge services to people regardless of their lifestyle, background and so on. I absolutely understand people’s concerns and I hope I have been able to offer reassurance to them.

We are committed to maintaining protections for single-sex services and will consider as part of our response to the consultation whether any further action is needed to reaffirm that approach. To be clear, the single-sex exceptions under the Equality Act 2010 allow a service provider to provide a service for women or men if an organisation needs to define it in a way that does not allow a trans person to access their services, or to provide a service to them in a different way. They are able to do that as long as they can show that it is a proportionate means of meeting a legitimate aim.

The issue of transgender offenders has understandably been raised as well. The case of Karen White in particular has been examined. I want to be clear that the case of Karen White is appalling. There was a series of terrible failings that should never have happened. In the light of that, my ministerial colleagues at the Ministry of Justice are looking again at the decision-making systems that apply to the management of transgender prisoners, as well as how they were applied in that case.

The issue of children is of concern outside the walls of this Chamber. We have no intention of lowering the age at which people may legally change their gender, namely the age of 18. We recognise the increase in referrals of children and adolescents to gender-identity services for people aged under 18, so we have committed to improve our understanding of the impacts on children and adolescents of changing their gender, and to gather evidence on the issues faced by people who were born female and who transition in adolescence. We are not the only country to witness and experience the increase, but we can offer support and refuge services to people regardless of their lifestyle, background and so on. I absolutely understand people’s concerns and I hope I have been able to offer reassurance to them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth for securing the debate. I hope I have been able to reassure him on some of his concerns, and other hon. Members who hold different views on the concerns they expressed. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that everyone in our society can thrive, and to upholding the rights and protections that all our citizens enjoy. We want to support and protect women; we want to support, protect and improve the lives of transgender people; and I hope that those two ambitions have the support of the House.
10.52 am

David T. C. Davies: Of course, everyone who has concerns about this issue in any direction totally condemns any violence against anyone who is transsexual in any way. Those responsible for physical or verbal assaults, or any other kind of abuse, deserve to be punished with the full force of the law. I have never met anyone who disagrees with that proposition.

I say respectfully to the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) that I have in fact tried to educate myself on the issue of violence against women over a number of years. In fact, I served on the Home Affairs Committee between about 2005 and 2010, when it brought out its reports on forced marriage and female genital mutilation, issues that I raised on many occasions in the House of Commons. I was glad when legislation was passed, especially on FGM, although I am disappointed that despite all the laws and fine words, there has still not been a single conviction for female genital mutilation—that probably wanders a little from the topic, but violence against women is an important issue.

On the consultation, I am not surprised that so many people seem to be in favour of changing the law. Mermaids, a publicly funded body, has published online a primer encouraging people to fill it out, which is not right.

The important thing—it comes down to this—is that if people believe a trans woman is a woman, then it is not possible to protect female sex-segregated spaces in the way that many campaigners would like. Many people do not accept the proposition that a trans woman is a woman. A trans woman is a trans woman, worthy of respect, absolutely deserving of protection under the law against discrimination, or physical or verbal assault, but not necessarily eligible to access single-sex areas.

Finally, I very much welcome the fact that on all sides at least lip service is given to the idea of debate. I hope the Minister sets an example by encouraging any local authorities that wish to in their areas to allow groups such as Woman’s Place to hold meetings, and by meeting with some of those groups. To the best of my knowledge, such meetings have not yet taken place, although I have certainly tried to facilitate them. I look forward to that happening in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered proposals to allow self-identification of gender.

10.55 am

Sitting suspended.

Rape Myths and Juries

11 am

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered rape myths and juries.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

In August, I submitted a freedom of information request to the Crown Prosecution Service about the conviction rates for rape. The answer revealed that less than a third of prosecutions brought against young men result in a conviction. Men aged 18 to 24 in England and Wales are consistently less likely to be found guilty than older men. Only 32% were convicted last year—the lowest of any age group. Successful prosecutions against men aged 25 to 59 were much higher at 46%.

The Guardian used those figures in its recent excellent series on rape.

Given that the vast majority of rapes are acquaintance or date rape, the conviction figures suggest a reluctance by juries to find young men guilty of rape. We need to explore the reasons behind that and how rape myths, stereotypes and attitudes affect juries. The rates may reflect the prevailing attitudes in society, and therefore of juries, towards young women, who are often blamed for their own rape.

The number of men charged with rape in England and Wales has fallen to its lowest level in a decade—a 23% decline in 2017-18, according to the Crown Prosecution Service’s annual “Violence against Women and Girls Report”. Yet at the same time, the number of rapes reported to the police soared to more than 41,000 in 2016-17, with a massive 150% increase in the last five years. Despite fewer charges, there was a 13% fall in prosecutions and a 12% decrease in convictions.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend highlights some figures; according to latest figures, just over half the reports of rape resulted in a charge. Of the cases that were prosecuted, 42% did not result in a conviction. The most vital thing for women who report rape is that they are believed. Does she agree that those figures cause serious harm to that principle?

Ann Coffey: I agree; women must have confidence when reporting rape that they will be believed and taken seriously, and that they will have justice.

There has been a 72% increase in the number of cases that have been administratively finalised—meaning the police have closed them after receiving advice from the CPS. A Guardian article on 24 September quoted a whistleblower who said that prosecutors were being told to “ditch ‘weak’ rape cases to improve figures”.

That advice could severely limit victims’ access to justice and lead to cases involving younger victims, students or those with mental health issues being less likely to result in a charge. The overwhelming majority of rape victims still choose not to report to the police for fear of not being believed, yet the prevailing narrative in some sections of the media is that lying about rape is common. The opposite is true. Only 17% of those who experience sexual violence report it to the police, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics for March 2017. The CPS estimated in 2012 that only 3% of the 1,149 cases heard may have been malicious.
Juries view evidence through the lens of prevailing stereotypes shared with the wider community. Rape myths still dominate in our culture, including that a woman who has drunk a lot cannot complain if she is raped, that it is rape only if someone has injuries, that real rapes are done by strangers in alleyways, that it is a crime of passion and that women invite rape by what they wear. Research shows that stereotypes about how rape victims are expected to behave remain prevalent in society and, by extension, in juries. There is still a lack of understanding about why a woman might not report an assault immediately or might not fight, or how a victim of a sexual assault might behave in the immediate aftermath of an attack. There are still huge gaps in the public understanding about what sexual consent actually means.

The End Violence Against Women Coalition commissioned YouGov research, which will be published shortly, that shows confusion among the public about what constitutes rape, particularly concerning the majority of rapes involving acquaintances. Almost a third thought it was not rape if a woman had flirted on a date but had not wanted sex. Juries take those attitudes into the court room with them. Defence lawyers play up those myths in an attempt to rubbish the character of the witness.

Dr Dominic Willmott, an academic at Huddersfield University, conducted a study in 2017 in which he replicated genuine trial environments to assess how attitudes and backgrounds had an impact on juries. The study found that nearly half of jurors in rape cases came to a verdict before deliberation, indicating a predictive relationship between juror demographics, personal experience and psychological make-up, with an impact on verdicts in rape cases. Dr Willmott said the research demonstrated

“that for all the best efforts of the courts, juries are not necessarily offering a fair and impartial assessment of the evidence, particularly within rape cases. Past experiences play a huge role in shaping the person you are, and inevitably affects your view on society. As well as the importance of demographic features of the jurors, attitudes towards rape were found to be the strongest predictor of high numbers of not guilty verdicts.”

We all saw how the culture at the time protected very well-known people such as Jimmy Saville. We saw how young girls who were victims of shocking sexual exploitation in Rotherham and Rochdale were seen as prostitutes who consented to their abuse. Language and how we talk about behaviour is very important; it shapes what we see. The Crown Prosecution Service has said:

“Addressing the low conviction after contest rate in cases involving young defendants represents a challenge for the entire criminal justice system.”

The Ministry of Justice responded to an open e-petition in July this year that called on the Government to produce compulsory training about rape myths for all jurors in rape trials by appointing Professor Cheryl Thomas to gather data from experienced jurors at a range of courts throughout the country. The Government response to the petition said:

“We know that rape myths exist within our society, and therefore jurors could believe these myths and that this could affect their interpretation of the facts of the case. In the light of the shocking figures on charging and convictions there should be a stronger response, because this situation can only get worse without action.

I would like an urgent independent inquiry that would include some controversial areas, such as a review of the use of juries in rape cases; jury vetting; specialist rape courts; current law; judicial directions; examination of the falling number of rapes charged by the CPS; low conviction rates for rape, especially date and acquaintance rape; the role of expert witnesses in rape cases; pre-recorded cross-examination; and sexual history evidence rules. I absolutely accept that the justice system needs to ensure that the innocent go free and the guilty are sentenced, but my concern is that conviction rates indicate that the scales of justice are tipped against the victim. The most common cause of unsuccessful prosecutions in rape cases is jury acquittal.

Other countries have been pondering this difficult question. The Law Commission in New Zealand published a report in December 2015 that concluded:

“The nature of sexual violence is such that, as a form of criminal offending, it is not well suited to fact-finding by a jury comprised of 12 laypersons.”

The German and French court systems have a collaborative court model in which professional judges decide cases with citizens. Sir John Gillen, who issued a report yesterday in response to serious concerns about low conviction rates for rape in Northern Ireland and the polluting effect of rape myths said,

“there is no doubt that there is a growing belief, particularly among young people, that a jury should be replaced by a judge or by a judge and two lay people such as we see in family courts and aspects of youth justice.”

Specialist domestic violence courts were introduced in the mid-2000s. At the time, the prevailing view was that it was the woman’s own fault if she did not leave an abusive husband. New specialist sexual violence courts could draw on experience from those courts of using specially trained staff, ensuring speedy access to victim support services and ensuring that the court is a physically safe space for the victim, for example by using separate entrances and special measures for giving evidence.

The roll-out of the successful pilots in Leeds, Liverpool and Kingston of section 28 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, which allows pre-recorded cross-examination, has still not happened. Those pilots, which involved vulnerable child witnesses, were evaluated as very successful in improving the quality of cross-examination and stopping bullying attacks on the character of witnesses. I hope that the Minister can give us positive news about when pre-recorded cross-examination will finally be rolled out, and that she will consider offering it to victims whose access to a fair trial may be compromised by rape myths.

There is also controversy about the extent of the personal records and data that police request of rape complainants before going ahead with their cases. The nature and extent of the information requested from complainants varies widely across police forces. There is concern that intensive examination of a complainant’s communication and behaviour to establish their “credibility” is too often a proxy for rape myths and discriminatory assumptions. The new Director of Public Prosecutions addressed that issue in his first major speech, saying that rape complainants must have their personal privacy, including their mobile phone records, protected.

Dr Willmott has called for the vetting of juries for preconceived bias. He argues that although judges can tell jurors to disregard certain things, that does not make any difference.
"Our study highlights that even before the case has begun, jurors' psycho-social make up predisposes them towards particular verdict decisions, making a vetting system for juries increasingly important. By implementing such a system we can reduce existing bias from juries, which should result in a greater number of fairer outcomes."

There have been calls for experts to be allowed to give evidence about rape myths. There is a case for updating judicial directions to take into account the impact of social media and how it can feed into rape myths—another issue taken up by Sir John Gillen. Baroness Stern raised the impact of rape myths on juries in her 2010 review, quoting a specialist rape prosecutor who said:

"You can forgive juries for finding it hard to convict given the burden of proof and when the defence works so hard to discredit the victim's case. There is a lot of general misunderstanding about trauma."

In Scotland, section 275C of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 allows prosecutors to call expert evidence at trial. That would help jurors to understand typical psychological responses to rape.

Currently, UK law does not differentiate between stranger rape and acquaintance rape, which both carry a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Juries understand the evidence for stranger rape, but complex issues about consent in acquaintance rape are not as well understood. A senior police officer said that "at the moment we are asking juries to do something incredibly difficult."

That is true. We ask jurors to make judgments about consent to sex where the victim and the accused are known to each other and the victim may have consented to some sexual activity but not to penetration. It is challenging for juries to judge whether the defendant had a reasonable belief that consent was given, especially when drink was involved. That is where myths and stereotypes kick in.

The consent elements of rape, as outlined in CPS guidelines, are that "B does not consent to the penetration and A does not reasonably believe that B consents". The CPS guidelines go on to state:

"Proving the absence of consent is usually the most difficult part of a rape prosecution, and is the most common reason for a rape case to fail. Prosecutors will look for evidence such as injury, struggle, or immediate distress to help them prove that the victim did not consent, but frequently there may be no such corroborating evidence."

Sir John Gillen called for a "discernible shift towards a requirement for some measure of affirmative or participative expression of consent and away from a focus on resistance as a means to prove the absence of consent."

I have the greatest respect and admiration for members of the public who do jury service, some of whom have to sit through evidence of the most horrifying and brutal crimes inflicted by one person on another. Serving on a jury is indeed a public service. However, I return to my original figures. Juries are reluctant to convict young men of rape. It is no use wringing our hands about that. We cannot have a situation in which young women who have been raped feel that they have no access to justice, because that undermines the whole justice system.

Ministers need to take strong action, including a fundamental review of the whole system. They must take the lead to forge better public understanding of rape myths and what constitutes consent. Sir John Gillen, who suggested a large-scale publicity campaign and training for juries, said:

"Jurors don't just land from the moon, they are people like you and me."

A perfect storm is developing in which juries are reluctant to convict young men who are charged with rape, so the CPS is reluctant to prosecute and the police are therefore reluctant to refer. The result is that victims will stop coming forward and young women will be denied justice. The danger is that we will be thrown back to the dark days, when victims of abuse were silenced and dared not speak out.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) for securing this incredibly important debate. She has done a significant amount of work to support young people in the criminal justice system and is a committed advocate for victims of sexual exploitation. Thanks to her hard work, all references to "child prostitute" were removed from legislation and the victims are properly recognised.

Rape is an extremely serious criminal offence that can lead to lifelong trauma for victims and their families. I take extremely seriously the great courage, support and perseverance it can take for victims to go through the criminal justice system in pursuit of justice—the bravery it takes to report the crime to the police, and the emotional strain and trauma of having to recount details of the incident to the police and then the CPS during the investigatory stages. We know that the court process is often intrusive, uncomfortable and intimidating. It is vital that our court process should not aggravate and compound the victim's experience.

In responding to this important debate, I will highlight the importance of evidence in this area, say what the Government are doing to protect rape victims, and finally look to the future. The hon. Lady, who began her speech with the facts she obtained in response to an FOI request, is aware of the importance of evidence and rightly highlighted a number of important statistics. She is right to underscore that more people are coming forward to report rape, which is very much to be welcomed, and to recognise that that huge social change followed much work by campaigners and a change in attitude towards women. She also highlighted that, despite that rise in reporting, the number of prosecutions has fallen. That is disappointing and worrying.

The hon. Lady said that convictions are falling. Although that is true for the period 2017-18, it is interesting to note that in June 2018 the conviction rate for sexual offences was at its highest in a decade, at 68%. It is therefore possible that, when cases reach court, they are more likely to result in a conviction. She also rightly pointed out that there are fewer convictions in cases where the complainant and the accused are known to each other and aged between 18 and 24.

In those circumstances, this is an important debate. We need to look into these issues to ensure that reports of rape are taken seriously at every stage of the process. At the heart of the debate are the questions why convictions are not being secured and why juries are not convicting.

The hon. Lady said she believes there is reluctance on the part of juries to find young men guilty of rape because of rape myths in our culture. There is a fear
that some believe that women who have drunk have only themselves to blame, and that juries acquit on the basis of their prejudices and attitudes to rape, rather than the facts and issues before them.

If that were right, it would be appalling. Women who come forward should have confidence that they will get justice. They should be judged on the facts presented to the court. It is important when we consider changing policy that those changes are driven by evidence, so I am pleased that we are currently analysing this important issue and looking at the reasons why juries come to their conclusions in rape cases. As the hon. Lady mentioned, Professor Cheryl Thomas, the leading academic expert on juries and jury research, is currently considering these issues. She has been commissioned by the president of the Queen's Bench Division to conduct empirical research with jurors to help inform our understanding of the impact of rape myths and the development of future training and guidance for jurors.

Professor Thomas will be considering two things that are pertinent to this debate: first, to what extent jurors who have served on real trials believe myths and stereotypes about rape, and secondly, to what extent further guidance to jurors, in the form of educational materials, might be helpful in ensuring that myths and stereotypes are not applied in cases of rape or sexual offence. That evidence will help us to understand the bias of juries and help to inform policy in that critical area. Once we have the evidence base, we can consider the matters identified by the hon. Lady, who raised interesting and important questions.

Protecting women—particularly young women—when they go through the criminal justice system is vital to ensuring justice, and across Government we are taking a number of steps in that area at every stage of a woman's journey. During the initial stages of a complaint the Metropolitan police has trained officers and frontline staff to deal with victims of rape when they first come forward, to ensure accurate recording. All CPS prosecutors who work on rape cases have specialist training on stereotypes, rape myths and consent. The CPS has almost doubled the number of specialist prosecutors in its dedicated rape and serious sexual offences unit, and it has enhanced training and improved the support that it offers to victims through criminal proceedings.

When a victim goes through court, we must ensure that they are protected and get justice. We are committed to rolling out pre-recorded cross-examination of vulnerable witnesses in Crown court centres in England and Wales. The review of disclosure by the Attorney General's Office, published on 15 November, referred to the importance of ensuring that complainants are not subjected to unwarranted intrusion into their privacy, or deterred from reporting offences or participating in the criminal process. The 2018 “Crown Court Compendium” builds on existing guidance, giving more examples of possible directions and listing situations in which jury directions may be needed in a rape case. Judges can sit on sexual offences cases only if they have undertaken specialist training from the Judicial College. More broadly, we have protected funding of more than £6.4 million for 85 rape support centres across England and Wales, and we have committed to continuing investment—£4 million a year until 2020-21—in sexual assault referral centres.

Let me turn to the questions that the hon. Lady raised about solutions to this problem. She highlighted a number of important questions, and we are thinking carefully about how we can educate jurors in this area. As I mentioned, however, it is important that we approach this issue on the basis of evidence. The judiciary rightly maintain that any course of action should be well considered and informed by empirical evidence, and therefore we will await the outcome of the review by Professor Thomas before taking any steps.

The hon. Lady mentioned a number of important statistics, but it is worth pointing out that there is conflicting evidence on the behaviour of juries in rape cases. In the year ending December 2017, approximately 44% of 5,784 not guilty pleas for sexual offences resulted in a conviction—a higher figure than for robbery and offences of violence against the person. In the same year, the sexual offences acquittal rate was close to the average acquittal rate for all offences, at 56%, and that was lower than the acquittal rate for offences such as the possession of weapons and theft, which were both at 60%.

I am conscious that gender stereotypes unfortunately exist in our society, and I am aware of concerns that they can create an environment that enables violence against women and girls. As jurors are picked from society as a whole, it is possible that rape myths sometimes have an impact on juror decision making, but more research is needed firmly to establish that link. For that reason, I ask for the House's patience while we await the results of research that is due to report in the new year. I will keep the hon. Lady updated on any developments, and I will be happy to meet her when that evidence is produced.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.
Nursing: Higher Education Investment

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Eleanor Smith (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered investing in nursing higher education in England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I am proud to speak on an issue close to my heart. Before I entered Parliament, I was privileged to work as a nurse for almost 40 years, and last year my daughter graduated as a nurse. Nursing is an incredible profession, a fulfilling career and full of opportunities for those who choose that rewarding path. Nurses are the most trusted profession in Britain, a position they have held for years, with 96% of the public trusting nurses to tell them the truth. It may come as little surprise to hon. Members that politicians and nurses are telling us. They are telling us what must happen to meet the needs of communities across England.

 Everywhere there are people, there are nurses, but they are not necessarily doing what we might think they are doing. Yes, nurses connect with patients and families to understand what people need, but they are also diagnosing, prescribing, performing surgery, creating care plans, delivering treatment, overseeing clinics, managing hospitals, working as chief executives and designing primary care services.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned that nurses are valued, but if the Government really valued them, they would give them a king as chief executives and designing primary care services.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend mentioned that nurses are valued, but if the Government really valued them, they would give them a position they have held for years, with 96% of the public trusting nurses to tell them the truth. It may come as little surprise to hon. Members that politicians and nurses are telling us. They are telling us what must happen to meet the needs of communities across England.

Everywhere there are people, there are nurses, but they are not necessarily doing what we might think they are doing. Yes, nurses connect with patients and families to understand what people need, but they are also diagnosing, prescribing, performing surgery, creating care plans, delivering treatment, overseeing clinics, managing hospitals, working as chief executives and designing primary care services.

Eleanor Smith: Absolutely. That is where nursing is important. Nurses are becoming specialists in Parkinson’s, Turner syndrome and sickle cell, all of which are specialisms that will be required in the future of nursing.

Nurses are working in cutting-edge research on ethics, safety, improvements to care and new ways of working. They are leading from the frontline, and as professionals they should be at the heart of strategic policy making. Nursing is at a critical junction in our healthcare and systems, yet the Government are without an independent chief nursing officer after the removal of that critical leadership post from the heart of the Department of Health and Social Care. That is an insult to the nursing profession.

How many of my right hon. and hon. Friends are regularly contacted by their constituents about health and social care issues—people struggling, writing about services being reduced or cut, unable to access support without help? Increasingly, that is happening because there are not enough staff to run things safely. Across the country, nurses are clear that staffing for safe and effective care is their most important priority and their biggest worry.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that in the specialisms in particular—in my own area, the problem is with learning disabilities—there are such reduced numbers going through training because of the loss of the bursary, that it will have a huge impact on care homes and other forms of care delivery? Does she see that as a total tragedy?

Eleanor Smith: I do, and I will talk about that in my speech and touch on the lack of nursing students coming into those particular areas because of the bursary’s disappearance.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very sound speech. Does she agree that it is a completely false economy that, as a student nurse told me just today, of the 45 recruits to mental health nursing in his cohort, under the new financial regime only 18 remain on the course in its second year? We desperately need those nurses—what a price to pay!

Eleanor Smith: My hon. Friend is totally right. Again, I will address that point in my speech, but it is noted. I am glad that my hon. Friends are intervening, because I will address that point in my speech, but it is noted. I am glad that my hon. Friends are intervening, because it shows the importance of this debate on nursing and the lack of it. I am glad the nurses came to my hon. Friend and told her what it is like. The situation is beyond shocking. There are almost 42,000 vacant nursing posts in the national health service in England. Without policy and funding intervention, that will grow to almost 43,000 by 2023.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech. On the current 42,000 shortfall, does she agree that with so many European Union nationals potentially leaving the health service, that figure could well be compounded in future?

Eleanor Smith: That is definitely so. My hon. Friend is completely right, and with the way Brexit is going, that is understandable. People working in the NHS understand that.

Without policies and funding intervention, as I have said, the shortfall will grow to almost 43,000 by 2023, and that number is on the low side. It does not account for the one third of nurses who are due to retire in the next 10 years. It does not include nursing shortages in social care or public health. Students are being forced to plug the gaps. They should be learning, but instead they are providing care before qualification, without supervision and before they are ready—all because we do not have enough nurses. That is deeply unfair to students. It is risky for qualified nurses and it is unsafe for patients, and all because no one wants to pay for the solution.
Poor workforce planning in health and care is not new. Even in my time, policy makers pursued a boom-to-bust approach, rather than ensuring that supply was available to meet demand. Six years on from the Health and Social Care Act 2012, it is fundamentally unclear who is accountable for workforce strategy. As a result, it is not being done by anyone. Earlier this year, Health Education England held a consultation, but Professor Ian Cumming has failed to deliver a workforce strategy. We are told that it will be dealt with in the new 10-year plan. Mr Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, has been handed an additional £20.5 billion a year for the NHS by 2023-24, and it is widely understood that his long-term plan must address the extreme gaps in our nursing workforce by fixing the supply issue and providing funding.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I do not think it should focus only on the bursary, as some of the letters have—important though that is—but on the Government’s lamentable failure to bring in nursing apprenticeships, which provide such an important route for many youngsters from working-class areas in the Black Country, including areas in her constituency and mine.

Eleanor Smith: My right hon. Friend covers a point about apprenticeships that I will address in my speech, because what we are saying is that it is one of the routes, but not the only route.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on a topic that is important to us all. The Royal College of Nursing has made it very clear that the priority for the bulk of investment in nursing education must be the three-year undergraduate degree, because that is the fastest and safest route for growth at scale. Does she agree with that, and does she agree that we must not try to do nursing training on the cheap?

Eleanor Smith: Absolutely; I totally agree. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. We should not be doing the training on the cheap. I will try to address that point in my speech.

There is a huge risk that the long-term plan will be like previous plans and that Simon Stevens will not provide or fund a solution. He is spending money on services that cannot be staffed. He is creating new posts that cannot be filled, because trained and qualified registered nurses to fill those posts do not exist. I wonder whether the Prime Minister knows that nurses do not grow on trees, just as money does not. The five-year forward view substantially failed to create nurses. In fact, during that time, the opposite happened: we lost thousands of nurses. I ask right hon. and hon. Members what on earth should be prioritised above growing the number of nurses.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I agree that this is a really important issue and we must do all we can to support the nurses of the future, but does the hon. Lady agree that it is worth recording that there are 13,000 more nurses on wards today than there were in 2010?

Karen Lee: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I do not think it should focus only on the bursary, as some of the letters have—important though that is—but on the Government’s lamentable failure to bring in nursing apprenticeships, which provide such an important route for many youngsters from working-class areas in the Black Country, including areas in her constituency and mine.

Eleanor Smith: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but unfortunately, as someone who has worked on the wards, I have to say that we do not see it; it does not feel like that.

Simply put, there is no long-term plan without a registered nursing workforce. Whatever ambition the Secretary of State and Simon Stevens must be matched by credible growth in the number of registered nurses.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Eleanor Smith: Yes.

Karen Lee: Does my hon. Friend—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. It is not for me to rule on whether people should or should not give way, but I should say that it is not really on for people just to wander into the Chamber and seek to intervene within two minutes of doing so. I say that gently, but it is not for me to decide who should be given way to; that is a matter for the speaker.

Karen Lee: Sorry, I have been at another meeting.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): That is not the point, if I may say so to the hon. Lady. Would the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) like to give way?

Eleanor Smith: I will take this intervention and then I would like to make some progress.

Karen Lee: I will be brief. There was mention of how many nurses there were on the wards. I was a nurse on a ward, and I am getting older. The drop by one third in the number of applications means that, even with the new nurses, we do not have the number of people to fill the vacancies. The Prime Minister makes great play of how much money there will be for all these nurses. If nurses are not trained and people are retiring and those places are not being filled by new nurses, how do we do it?

Eleanor Smith: I will address that in my speech. I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention.

I welcome the public commitment made by the Secretary of State at the Royal College of Nursing on 31 October to invest in growing the number of nurses through higher education, including through the long-term plan, because I feel that finally someone is paying attention. The Secretary of State has said that he will look into the possibility of introducing safe nurse staffing legislation. He has said that he will explore anything that might help to address the problem we face. I sincerely hope that the Secretary of State means it, because he and Simon Stevens have the power to fix this mess with proper funding and intervention.

That brings me to the crux of the debate. We have to grow our nursing workforce, so the only question that we need to answer is this: how do we fund what we know is the fastest and safest way to do that at scale, in the light of our crisis? Higher education is the best and most cost-effective way to ensure that we have the right
number of registered nursing staff, with the right skills and experience, which patients need and deserve. New routes into nursing, which are welcome if done right, still cannot educate anywhere near enough nurses to an appropriate skill level to meet the current need, let alone the future one. It is time to fix the supply pipeline and for the Secretary of State and Simon Stevens to stand up and be counted.

In 2016, the Government removed the NHS bursary and replaced it with a student loan. The £1.2 billion that was taken out of healthcare higher education was framed as a saving, but where did it go? What did it save? Was it used to grow the number of nurses? The stated purpose of the Government’s reform was to increase the number of nursing students. It is against that goal that the impact of the Government’s reforms must be judged.

Let me bust a few myths. I expect the Minister to say, “The old bursary model placed an artificial cap on the number of nurse training places that universities could offer students.” That is factually untrue. Funding of nursing student numbers has always been a political choice. It has always been up to the Government to choose what they want to fund. I expect the Minister to say, “The loan model has not made it less attractive to apply.” In each year since the reform, applications to nursing courses have fallen. In September 2018, nearly 1,800 fewer nurses were due to start at university, compared with September 2016.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the robust way in which she is laying out the case. Since the 2016 reforms, we have seen a significant reduction in the number of people over the age of 25 going into nursing. The Select Committee on Health and Social Care has looked at that. Obviously, people over 25 have brought great value to nursing. Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes that we have seen have potentially been very detrimental to the nursing workforce?

Eleanor Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; he is totally right. There is a difference between the mature students who come into nursing and those who are 18. There is a great loss to those people and a great loss to us in the public sector—to hospitals, GP surgeries and, indeed, all the places where nurses work in the NHS. It is a great loss, and I will cover some aspects of that issue in my speech.

The only thing that has changed is that loans have been brought in. It is ludicrous to look at the numbers and deny that forcing nursing students on to loans has led directly to a drop in applications. That is exactly what has happened. The result is that the diversity and background of nursing students has changed radically, excluding many who would previously have been able to change their personal and economic circumstances through a rewarding career in nursing. That is the very thing that my hon. Friend was saying.

I expect the Minister to say, “There are still two applicants for every place available for a student to study nursing at university.” It is the current structures that are limiting the system from being able to capitalise on that appetite to study nursing.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing a really important debate. It is essential that the Minister addresses the issues raised. Is not the drop-out rate for student nurses a real cause for concern? A student nurse contacted me—I did go to the lobby organised by the Royal College of Nursing this morning—and gave some examples of the mounting costs under the present system. That mental health nurse was telling me about the costs of trains, taxis and accommodation. She works 37.5 hours a week on a placement. Transport to her placement is costing her £500 a month. Surely that has an impact on a person’s ability to sustain their attendance on a course and achieve the necessary outputs.

Eleanor Smith: I could not have put that as clearly as my hon. Friend has. I am glad that student nurses came and explained the situation to him, because that is the very reason why we are having this debate.

With the last bit of control that they have kept since the reform, the Government fund clinical placements, but they do not match the numbers to the volume of routes that they have created. They made nursing students, apprentices and nursing associates all compete for the same places. They did choose to fund, but it was not enough. Now it is a blame game full of finger-pointing. If there are so many people interested in becoming nurses and such high levels of vacant posts, why are the Government not doing more to convert the applicants into nurses?

I expect the Minister will say, “We have introduced new routes to expand the number of nursing staff.” There are nursing degree apprenticeships that few people are taking up, because employers do not have enough cash to release people to study. Nursing associates, who were introduced in a supporting role to the registered nurse, should never be a substitute for registered nurses. These efforts have been small and unpredictable. Most importantly, they have not addressed the heart of what grows the number of nurses safely and at scale: higher education. This is workforce panicking, not workforce planning.

I expect the Minister will say, “This Government have grown the number of nurses working in hospitals,” which is factually true, but distorts the truth that the overall number of nurses has only grown by less than 1% since 2010. While there are 7% more nurses in acute settings, there are 6,500 fewer nurses in the community, 43% fewer district nurses, a quarter fewer school nurses, nearly 5,000 fewer mental health nurses and 40% fewer learning disability nurses. Despite the Government’s rhetoric about moving more care into our communities, the workforce are simply not there to deliver it. Who has overseen that? Ian Cumming of Health Education England, Simon Stevens of NHS England and the Government.

Nursing students spend 50% of their time in placement, learning in the community, a care home or a hospital, but the services are so short of staff that students are being unsafely used to plug the gaps. Due to their placements and studies, they do not have time for part-time jobs to earn extra money. Like other hon. Members, I am contacted by constituents who tell me that they always wanted to be a nurse, but money worries and the pressure they feel are making them reconsider their choice. The personal cost of becoming a nurse is turning people away when health and care services need more growth. This is disgraceful, irresponsible and short-sighted.

However, our leaders have a real chance to secure major change. Nursing students need a new deal. All that is needed is political will, and for people to stand up and be accountable. I demand the bursary is brought
[Eleanor Smith]

back. Our future nurses urgently need more financial support if the Government are ever to tackle the workforce crisis. There needs to be an extension of the hardship funds for those who need more assistance.

At what point do we say enough is enough? How can we fail to act when faced with student nurses trying to balance their placement, part-time healthcare assistant work and trying to finish their coursework? How can anyone begin in a profession when they are already burnt out? It is disrespectful for any of us to stand here and tell stories about how much nurses make a difference to us, without acknowledging their professional expertise and their critical role in transforming services. We have to stop making their jobs harder and pushing people to the brink. No nursing student or nurse should have to grind their teeth and keep going, knowing that shortages mean that vital care is left undone. This situation is unsafe for everyone. It is morally reprehensible.

The Prime Minister gave an extra £20 billion to the NHS. Simon Stevens holds the pen. The Secretary of State will sign off the long-term plan. There is a small window of opportunity to change the future of nursing. We can either propel it forward or drag it back. I am determined to leave my daughter a legacy. I take public service seriously; that is why I went into nursing and why I am an MP.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the long-term plan will deliver the workforce strategy, how it will fulfil the Secretary of State’s commitment to creating more nurses, and how Simon Stevens and Ian Cumming will be held to account over fixing the nursing supply and investing in it. This is our moment to rebuild public trust and confidence, so I end by asking the Minister: what are you going to do?

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): There are about seven Members seeking to catch my eye. We need to get to the Front-Bench speeches by 3.30 pm. Therefore, I will impose a five-minute limit on all speeches straightaway. I should also point out that any interventions might reduce that further, so that is in colleagues’ hands.

2.55 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith), especially because she was a nurse. Incidentally, on her point that nurses are more popular than politicians, when the Houses of Parliament burnt down in the 1830s, the cheers could be heard from Westminster Bridge, where people took out their frustration with politicians.

It is wrong to approach this debate in an aggressive “them and us” spirit. We all aim to increase the funding for nurses to an appropriate and proper level. I agree that nurses do a fantastic job, but we should acknowledge those nurses who are involved in end-of-life care—in my hospital, they work closely with social care staff.

However, before addressing that, I should say that, only last week, I visited my hospital in Henley—Townlands Memorial Hospital—with the previous Minister for Health. I extend an invitation to the current Minister to visit the hospital, which has a unique way of doing business. We and the NHS see it as an exemplar in the country. We spoke to a number of nurses about the services they provide, particularly in relation to the rapid access care unit, which looks after people above a certain age very well—they typically seek treatment there. I pay tribute to those nurses.

In our conversation with the nurses, we raised the point about funding for their education. We had a very mature discussion about the lack of bursaries following Government action. As a result, there was a general agreement that the situation that existed with the bursaries was not particularly helpful to nurses seeking to become part of the nursing profession—the NHS effectively generated a cap on the number of people who applied—and that we need a system that encourages people to become nurses as well as go into other professions. We pointed out that, under the bursary system, 30,000 people who applied to become nurses were rejected, which is not a good situation.

We went on to discuss other things in relation to the nursing profession. In particular, the one thing they saw as inhibiting people from becoming a nurse was the price of housing, which is astronomical in the Henley constituency. We need a tremendous amount of affordable housing, to help people to get a start on the housing ladder, and to provide them with rented accommodation where possible.

In addition to visiting the hospital, I have worked with parish councils to encourage them to provide much smaller buses on much tighter routes to give people the ability to travel from their home to their job.

I have been told that the shortage of staff was due to EU nationals leaving, but when I raised that issue with the matron, it emerged that that was not the case at all—the shortage was due to operational reasons.

3.1 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): My mother is a retired nurse from the Windrush generation and my sister is in the nursing profession having studied midwifery and having been a health visitor. I value their contribution, and many other contributions, to health and social care in this country. I have some insight and understanding of the challenges that underfunding brings.

Health and social care in England is short of registered nurses. The NHS in England is missing nearly 42,000 nurses—it is estimated that, without significant funding and policy intervention by 2023, the figure will rise to almost 48,000. That is a conservative estimate drawn directly from the system-held data and should be seen as a public interest issue.

This serious underfunding for Royal College student nurses is a crisis in England and action must be taken to address it. England is now the only country in the UK without some form of bursary for the nursing degree. The First Minister of Scotland recently announced that the bursary for nursing and midwifery students in Scotland would rise to £10,000 by the academic year 2020-21. We in England are failing in that respect.

On 31 October, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care publicly committed to investing in nursing education, stating that nursing students must “get the support they need to complete their training so they can serve in our NHS. That is something we will specifically address in the long-term plan for the NHS”.

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Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the important point is that the nursing course demands full-time study? Someone cannot do a part-time job while they are taking a nursing course. Unfortunately, because of the lack of maintenance grant, in most other areas of higher education students have to do part-time jobs in order to keep themselves alive, but it is not an option for nurses.

Janet Daby: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and I will address that crucial issue.

What I need to know, and what student nurses, potential student nurses and England need to know, is this: when will we see the long-term plan to promote the sustainability of the NHS and when will the Government take it seriously? I ask because the number of applicants from England aged 18 decreased by 12% between 2016 and 2018, while the number of applications from those aged 25 and above from England fell by 40% in the same period. Furthermore, a decline in the number of mature students affects specialist areas of nursing such as learning disability and mental health.

In all areas of nursing, not having enough nurses means that the safety of care is a concern—it could become fundamentally unsafe. Frontline staff are compromised, and people seeking to access health and care services are not able to receive the quality of care that they need.

Nursing students spend 50% of their time in clinical practice and—as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin)—nursing courses run longer than many other degrees, which means that nursing students have no opportunity to take on part-time work to supplement their income. They deserve support that recognises the exceptional nature of nursing and we need to invest in their future. If we do that, we would also be investing in our NHS and, indeed, in England.

It is clear that student nurses work long hours, which demands much from them. This can be physically, mentally and in many cases emotionally draining. It is particularly difficult when a student nurse witnesses, for example, a newborn baby dying on a paediatric ward, or when they are caring for terminally ill patients or those with complex mental health needs. If the Government consider that training and the NHS worthy of recognition, when will they properly invest in student nursing careers?

I have been lobbied considerably. My local hospital is overstretched for health and care professionals, including for doctors and nurses. It seeks to recruit from overseas but, in the context of Brexit, the growth of the domestic workforce will be ever more important. The Government and NHS England must invest at least £1 billion a year to support student nurses. The figures I have been given show that the previous Minister undertook to give up to £10,000 to people training in that field, to try to address the shortages. The new policy was introduced, but I understand that the aim behind it was to ensure that more places were available so that more people with the desire and the aptitude could train. The figures I have been given show there are 13,000 more nurses on the wards now than there were in 2010.

Looking at some of the figures, it is evident there has been a drop in the number of people applying to become nurses, but at this stage there are still many more applications for nursing than there are nursing training places. I was not a parliamentarian when the new policy was introduced, but I understand that the aim behind it was to ensure that more places were available so that more people with the desire and the aptitude could train. The figures I have been given show there are 13,000 more nurses on the wards now than there were in 2010.

In January I was a member of the Select Committee on Health when it produced the nursing workforce report that the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams) mentioned earlier. It showed specific shortages in mental health, learning disability and district nursing. I understand that the previous Minister undertook to give up to £10,000 to people training in that field, to try to address the shortages. Will the Minister tell us how that is working and whether it is increasing applications? Also, the Government had recognised specific challenges for
people wishing to go back into nursing or to develop nursing as a career after having children. Is the Minister looking into what support can be offered to those with disabilities and those with children to make sure that they are still able to access nurse training and become the fabulous nurses that they can be?

The issue of part-time jobs has been raised. Most of the nursing students I have worked with in my career have had part-time jobs, usually as a healthcare assistant, often on the same ward that they have worked on as a nurse, so I am not sure the point that was made entirely reflects what I have seen.

Finally, I want to mention alternative routes into nursing. There is more than one route to achieving a goal. There are opportunities for people to work as nursing associates. Some of the healthcare assistants I have worked with have done that, and they really enjoy their training. There is also the opportunity to go into a nurse apprenticeship as an alternative way of training while working. That is not for everybody, because people want different things, but it is another way in which we can increase nurse numbers without having an impact on training. I am aware of the time, but will the Minister update us on—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady’s time is up.

3.11 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing this debate, and the RCN student nursing campaign, “Fund Our Future”, on putting the issue firmly on the agenda. I cannot speak with her authority from experience, but I am chair of the all-party group on students and also represent a significant number of student nurses, midwives and allied health professionals in training at Sheffield Hallam University.

It is disappointing that we have to be here debating this issue again, because we have been over the argument several times. I remember the debate that we had in this Chamber in January 2016 when the Government first proposed to end the previous funding system and introduce loans and fees. I remember a powerful speech from the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield). She talked about how hard it was to be a student nurse; how she bore the scars of her nurse training; and how nurses had to learn, take exams and also go through placement changes every eight to 12 weeks, which presented significant challenges for mature students. She also clarified that when we talk about mature students, in many cases we are talking about people not in their 40s and 50s but in their 20s and 30s—people with young families and single mums.

One of the students from Sheffield Hallam University who contacted me ahead of today’s debate was Clary Manners, who echoed many of those points from her current experience. She said she gave up a well-paid job to train as a mental health nurse. She currently does 37 hours a week on placement and has a three-hour round drive there and back each day for the placement. She pays £10 in parking charges when she gets to the hospital. She takes no holidays. She has little spare time because she takes bank nursing jobs to boost her family income, but still her four children are on free school meals because of the struggle to get by on her income.

In the debate in 2016, the hon. Member for Lewes said—this view was echoed throughout the Chamber—that encouraging people to take on debt would “definitely put them off entering nursing, and to say otherwise is madness.”—[Official Report, 11 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 217WH.]

The then Health Minister, Ben Gummer, assured us that what the Government were trying to do—you could not make this up—was to share the benefits of the funding system for other students with nursing, midwifery and allied health students. Some of us questioned in what way a £50,000 debt was a benefit, but he was insistent that we would see an increase in applications. Now we know he was wrong. UCAS figures published earlier this year show that applications for the current year were down by a third on the same point in 2016—it is a continuing trend—and by 13% in the past year alone.

The changes have been a particular barrier to those from lower-income families, which is hugely important because nursing and midwifery has been one of the channels of social mobility available for many who do not enter conventional university. We have heard how the profession has traditionally been dominated by mature students, who have been particularly hard-hit in the fall-off in numbers. Overall, compared with when the changes to nursing degree funding were made in 2016, we have almost 1,800 fewer nurses due to start at university. I remind Government Members that although they talk about the 13,000 extra nurses now on the wards, many of them started their training before 2010 under a Labour Government. There is a pipeline for nursing supply, and the current system benefits from the pipeline that we put in place.

There are almost 42,000 nursing vacancies in England. Without action now, that could rise to 48,000 in the next five years. The Government have a responsibility to fix that, and they can do it by introducing a student funding system that is fit for purpose and that can reverse the drop in applications and encourage people to take up nursing in the way that they did previously.

3.16 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) for securing the debate. I declare an interest: I am the child of two doctors, the sister of a doctor and the wife of a doctor. Through my entire life I have been humbled by how hard all the doctors, nurses and midwives in our NHS work and by their dedication to their patients and the fundamentally huge professionalism that they show every day.

A couple of weeks ago I visited the palliative care team at the J’s Hospice, which helps people towards the end of their life in Chelmsford and across large parts of Essex. I give my huge thanks to the nurses there for the work that they do. As I left, I asked them whether there was one thing that would change their lives that they would really like politicians to do, and they said, “Please can you get us a car park permit so that, when we go out to meet the patients we try to care for in their homes, we do not get a parking ticket if we end up having to park a residential parking bay?” I do not know whether the Minister can change that, but that is a real ask from them. They do amazing work. One more thing they said was that if there was a little bit of capital funding, they
would love some help with some digital technology so that they do not need to go back to base to fill out their patient records.

I am also proud to have a brand-new medical school in my constituency. Anglia Ruskin University has a medical school that opened this autumn. I spoke to the acting vice-chancellor earlier in the week and he told me that things are going really well. It has its 100 students, it is brilliantly vibrant, and it is doing great work. I also asked him how the nursing courses are doing. On the good side, ARU has pioneered alternative routes into nursing. Nurse apprenticeships and nurse associateships are going really well and are very encouraging. They give people who would not necessarily have gone on to a traditional nursing course an alternative route into the career, and it is really appreciated. However, it was pointed out to me that since the bursaries went, there has been a drop in the number of applicants from eight per place to five. So there are still many more people applying for courses than places on the courses, which is good news, as is the fact that the quality of applicants is not dropping.

There is concern, however, at the fact that in some areas there are not enough high-quality applicants because of the changes. Mature students in particular are more debt-averse—that is probably the best phrase—and concerned about taking on a student loan. Those older students tend to be women. Today is a special day for women; the 50:50 Parliament campaign reminds us that women have been able to do the job we do here for 100 years. We need to make sure that women across the country can do the jobs they want to do. The change in nursing bursaries has had an effect on more mature students, especially with regard to entering adult nursing and mental health nursing. That is particularly true in my constituency, although it is less of an issue at other nursing colleges further from London.

The acting vice-chancellor of ARU says that the golden hello that a previous Minister introduced for mental health and learning disability nurses is welcome, but asks whether we could please consider it for adult nursing colleges further from London.

The second ask from Anglia Ruskin is a higher-profile campaign. There was some publicity, and a national campaign encouraging people to consider nursing, but it did not have much visibility. Nurses are wonderful people, and they make a huge difference to all of us. As well as encouraging the idea of supporting them through financial golden hellos when they are needed, we need more publicity about the routes into nursing, and the benefits.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that I shall have to reduce the time available for the last two Back-Bench speakers to four minutes. I apologise.

3.22 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Last month my mum celebrated her 95th birthday. Like many Irish nurses of her age, 75 years ago she travelled to London from Ireland to start her career in the very first generation of NHS nurses by qualifying as a state enrolled nurse at Warlingham Park psychiatric hospital.

Growing up, I saw at first hand just how vital a dedicated, passionate and happy nurse was for the welfare of the patients. That is why I am incensed when I see the treatment of trainee nurses today. Let us be clear. Nursing students are exceptional. Their courses are complex, their training is tough, and they spend significant amounts of time on clinical placement, working all hours of the day and night. They deserve a tuition and living cost funding model that recognises their extraordinary efforts and the importance of those efforts.

England is now the only country in the UK without some form of bursary for the nursing degree. That has crumbled the number of nursing applications and fostered an environment that is utterly unfair to nursing students and completely unsafe for patients. The Government promised that reforms would provide up to 10,000 additional nursing and health professional training places but, since the loss of the bursary, nursing applications in England are down by a third and falling fast. In fact, the 2018 figure was the lowest since nursing courses were first included in the UCAS system.

Nursing must be made an attractive profession for all groups, and restoring the bursary is a fundamental step to achieving that. Now is not the time to experiment with funding models for nursing students. One in three nurses is due to retire within the decade. Ensuring the long-term recruitment of new nurses must be a Government priority. That, of course, is before we take account of the Brexit impact: 75% of NHS trusts have done nothing to prepare for the UK’s departure from the EU. Meanwhile, there is an alarming trend for nurses and midwives to leave the profession before retirement, citing intolerable working conditions. However, it is not a numerical conundrum. It is a national crisis. A fall in student numbers is simply exacerbating our current recruitment shortage and it is patients who are being put at risk.

Ms H, a student nurse in London, contacted me this morning:

“I’ve felt completely unsafe on many occasions because of short staffing, not just because of my personal protection but more so because of the safety of the patients that I care for”.

Her colleague, Ms Y, found a young patient on an adolescent ward with a ligature tied around her neck.

And yet her main grievance is not about the present, but the future:

“It just doesn’t feel like there is really light at the end of the tunnel. Instead, we will just enter a longer tunnel of a career completely unsupported by Government.”

The warning signs are loud and clear. The conditions described today are unfit for those who selflessly care for our most vulnerable. The devastating consequences of leaving the system broken would be felt for decades to come.

3.26 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I was a mature student aged 41 when I started my nurse training, and I was a single parent. I could not have completed my training without a bursary, and could not have done a part-time job because it was a full-time course and I had a child to
care for. My younger single friends also needed their bursaries, because everyone had bills to pay. I was a nurse for 14 years and my colleagues are still nurses. None of us could have trained without the bursaries, and none of my friends would have gone on to be nurses as they are to this very day.

There are currently 41,000 nursing vacancies in NHS England. For the second year in a row, more nurses are leaving the profession than joining it, and one in three is expected to retire in the next 10 years. The NHS has spent £527 million plugging staffing gaps with expensive agency staff. I do not know how that makes any kind of economic sense. Added to that, the reality is that patient safety is compromised. Agency staff are not experts in their field. I have been in an arrest situation in which, out of seven trained, only three were regular nurses. It compromises patient safety. In addition, the number of European nurses registered in Britain dropped by 87% compared with 2016-17 figures. That means that there will be even fewer nurses.

The Government must stop putting lives at risk by understaffing and underfunding the NHS. People just are not signing up to be apprentice nurses. It sounds all right in theory, but does not work in practice. There is not the take-up. If we genuinely aim to train sufficient nurses the Government must join the Labour party in committing to reinstate nursing bursaries. Until that happens, no matter how many nursing jobs the Government fund, as nurses of my generation retire and numbers of the newly trained gradually decrease, we will simply not have the trained nurses to fill the places.

3.28 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) for securing this important debate, to which I have listened with great interest. I will not give him some ideas about how we do things in Scotland, give you some ideas about how we do things in Scotland, and I urge the Minister most sincerely to consider the policies that we have carried out. That simple measure can help us, as well as some of the other practices that we have had over the past few years. The Scottish Government have looked at the situation in Scotland, because sometimes we are more progressive. Sometimes it is easier, because Scotland has a smaller national health service, but we also value the NHS in Scotland. Earlier this decade, the First Minister announced that, in all hospitals in Scotland apart from those built under private finance initiative contracts, parking charges would be withdrawn. That has been carried out. That simple measure can help nurses, and I urge the Minister most sincerely to consider it, as well as some of the other practices that we have taken on board to increase nursing numbers in Scotland.

3.33 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on securing this important debate. The level of interest from Members shows how important this subject is. My hon. Friend spoke from great personal experience, and I thank her and everyone else who has worked in the NHS for their contribution over many years to make it an institution of which we are all rightly proud.

My hon. Friend comprehensively dismantled the Government’s arguments on the merits of removing the bursary. As she said, it is indisputable that the number of applications and the numbers of people starting courses have fallen, and that the age profile of students
has changed. She was right to say that the decision to abolish the bursary was a political choice, and not one that the Labour party would have made. Along with other Members, she highlighted areas that have fewer nurses in community and district hospitals and in settings that treat those with learning disabilities or mental health problems. Given that the pipeline for delivering nurses is not working as it should, those shortages may worsen. My hon. Friend was right to say that higher education is the best way to train enough highly skilled nurses to meet the needs of patients.

Marion Fellows: I wonder how many Members are aware that the Select Committee on Education will shortly publish the results of its inquiry into nursing apprenticeships.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Lady for her public service announcement. Let me now refer to some other contributions.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) made a fair point about how the price of housing exacerbates the shortage of nurses in some areas, and all Members will be aware that earlier this year more than 1,900 nursing vacancies were advertised in the Thames Valley area, although only five were filled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) gave a thoughtful and persuasive speech that highlighted the fact that the number of applicants over 25 has fallen by 40%, and she mentioned the impact of that in specialist areas. She was right to say that the nature of the nursing degree limits the opportunities for students to earn income outside their course demands.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) made a considered contribution about her criteria for what would make a successful training course, and I will reflect on that good piece of advice.

As always, it was a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who has great experience in this area. He referred back to a debate in 2016, and was right to say that this policy has damaged mature students and social mobility. Many concerns that were raised back in 2016—including by Government Members—have been ignored, or indeed come to pass.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) gave us the benefit of the thoughts of nurses in her constituency. It is always a good idea to hear directly from those on the frontline, and she came up with some interesting practical suggestions about what could be done to make the lives of nurses easier. Along with other Members, she mentioned the impact of this policy on the number of mature students applying, and the impact that that has on particular specialisms.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) set out why, due to a combination of factors, now is not the time to experiment with a flawed and unproven model. She mentioned the challenge of retention, and related some graphic and moving stories from her constituents. She was right to say that if we do not fix this issue now, we will pay the consequences for decades to come.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) spoke of her own frontline experience, and mentioned the expense and risk of over-reliance on agency staff. No doubt the challenges that we face and have discussed today will be exacerbated, which will place even more reliance on temporary and agency staff.

We have had a broad and wide-ranging debate. This is the Minister’s first outing in his role, and I welcome him to his place and congratulate him on his appointment. I was trying to work out whether he is the fourth or fifth Minister I have shadowed since I was appointed to my role just over three years ago, which shows that it is not just the NHS that has problems with retention.

The NHS faces a significant workforce challenge, and nowhere is that more pronounced than in nursing. England is missing about 42,000 nurses and, according to conservative estimates, without significant intervention that figure may rise to more than 48,000 by 2023. The situation is serious—other Members have described it as a “crisis”, which is absolutely right, but this crisis could have been avoided.

As Members have said, we are facing a perfect storm, with recent trends showing that more nurses are leaving the profession than joining it, the ongoing uncertainty over Brexit, the fact that one in three nurses is due to retire within the decade, and the catastrophic decision to scrap bursaries for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals. According to the Royal College of Nursing, “without enough nurses, care is fundamentally unsafe, frontline staff are compromised and people seeking access to health and care services are not able to receive the care that they need.”

The RCN also reports that services are sometimes so short-staffed that nursing students are inappropriately used to plug gaps in the workforce and have to look after patients before they are qualified to do so. That is an extremely worrying development.

This is a crisis of the Government’s own making. Before I come on to the current policy context of higher education funding, I will say a little about the circumstances leading to the decision to undertake the reforms back in 2015. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West said, workforce planning has not traditionally been a great strength of the NHS.

One of the first decisions of the coalition Government back in 2010 was to cut the number of nurse training places at university. In 2010-11, 20,092 places were funded, but that fell sharply to 17,741 in 2011-12 and dropped again to 17,546 in 2012-13. At that stage, David Green, vice-chancellor of the University of Worcester and a former chair of the west midlands group of universities said:

“We are heading straight for a national disaster in two to three years’ time.”

The RCN also warned that the cuts would cause “serious issues in undersupply for years to come.”

Those warnings were not heeded by the Secretary of State at the time, and a completely predictable and preventable crisis in the nursing workforce was created. Had the coalition Government only maintained the levels set by the last Labour Government, 8,000 additional nurses would have been trained in the last Parliament alone.

In the midst of this completely manufactured crisis, the abolition of undergraduate nurse bursaries was announced. I ask the Minister to consider whether that response to the crisis was the correct move. In just two lines in the 2015 autumn statement, with no consultation and no evidence base, the Government committed themselves
to a huge gamble with the future of the NHS workforce and with patient safety. The then Minister described the proposal as

“potentially one of the most exciting things that we will do in the NHS in the next five years to increase opportunity and quality, and the presence of nursing staff on wards.” —[Official Report, 4 May 2016; Vol. 609, c. 196.]

We were told at the time that our many concerns were misguided, and that the changes would lead to an additional 10,000 training places being provided. However, as we have heard, the opposite has happened. As of September 2018, almost 1,800 fewer people are due to start nursing university courses in England. The number of mature students has plummeted by some 15%, which as we have heard has had a particular impact on specialist areas. There has been a 12.9% reduction in the number of mental health nurses since 2010.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) said, there has been a shocking 40% reduction in learning disability nurses. Learning disability nursing celebrates its 100th anniversary in 2019. It will be an astonishing failure of the Government’s if they allow it to disappear altogether. That reduction comes at a time when the needs of people with learning disabilities have never been more paramount, with premature mortality resulting from complex health conditions and people being detained in assessment and treatment units for far longer than necessary.

We warned at the time that this policy would have precisely the effect that it has. After meeting representatives from the profession and looking at the evidence, the Government carried on. On the other hand, they did not formally consult the Royal Colleges before announcing their plans. I know that there has been some dialogue since then, and I will be grateful if the Minister will set out his recent discussions with the sector about the impact of the bursary cut and what steps the Government are taking to deal specifically with the crisis in learning disability and mental health nursing, which have been particularly hard-hit by the changes.

As various Members have said, the new Secretary of State recognised the crisis by saying “simply put: we need more” nurses, and that:

“That is something we will specifically address in the long-term plan for the NHS”.

That plan is due to be published any time now, and we will examine it very closely. However, if the Secretary of State is serious about tackling the workforce crisis and increasing the nursing workforce, he needs to make a key element of the strategy the reintroduction of NHS bursaries. It remains our policy to do so, and I will be grateful if the Minister will set out his recent discussions with the sector about the impact of the bursary cut and what steps the Government are taking to deal specifically with the crisis in learning disability and mental health nursing, which have been particularly hard-hit by the changes.

As various Members have said, the new Secretary of State recognised the crisis by saying “simply put: we need more” nurses, and that:

“That is something we will specifically address in the long-term plan for the NHS”.

That plan is due to be published any time now, and we will examine it very closely. However, if the Secretary of State is serious about tackling the workforce crisis and increasing the nursing workforce, he needs to make a key element of the strategy the reintroduction of NHS bursaries. It remains our policy to do so, and there has not been a single jot of evidence since they were removed to dissuade us from our initial view that their abolition was short-sighted, damaging and, ultimately, self-defeating.

In a written answer on 19 April this year, the former Minister indicated that the Department would publish an update on the effect of the plans later this year. Will the Minister advise us of where that is up to?

Although I have referred to a lot of large numbers to highlight the overall impact of the policy, it is important to hear, as we have from some Members, about the impact on individuals. I do not know if the Minister had the opportunity to attend the RCN drop-in earlier today. If he did not, I convey to him how well the students I spoke to conveyed how difficult it is to work under the new plan and I consider to be unsafe hours to make ends meet; how the inclusion of the student loan in income for benefits calculations leaves families worse off; and how the students notice that, each time they return to the lecture theatre, there are fewer and fewer of them. What assessment has the Department made of the attrition rate of university courses since the abolition of the bursary?

In conclusion, the uncertainty created by Brexit means that the reliance on recruitment from the EU that we have seen in recent years is no longer an option to shore up nursing numbers. Our NHS staff cannot keep giving more at the same time as we give them less. The Government need to fund our future and invest in nursing higher education. They simply cannot afford not to.

3.45 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, as I make my first speech in what I regard as one of the most important ministerial roles in the Government. I thank the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) for securing the debate. It has been a passionate debate that has reflected the importance that so many people—including, clearly, everybody in this Chamber—place on NHS professionals. It has recognised that high-quality education and training for nurses is fundamental to ensuring that the highest level of nursing care is given to patients. I obviously recognise that the hon. Lady, having served in the NHS for more than 40 years, has first-hand knowledge of the difference that nurses can make to individuals and families.

The hon. Lady raised several points in her speech, many of which I will address. However, she quite rightly opened by saying that we need and must have staffing that is safe for effective care. No one in the House would move from that. She asked several questions, including on bursaries, mature students and the number of people in training, which I will come to, but also made several points about the long-term plan, which it is important to talk about at the beginning.

The long-term plan will contain a chapter on NHS professionals and workforce planning, which I recognise will be the most important chapter. The hon. Lady will know that Health Education England undertook a consultation on the strategy for the workforce, which was published in draft last year. HEE also undertook a full consultation on the priorities for the health and care workforce, which concluded in the summer. The “Talk Health and Care” platform has been introduced, which the Government particularly expect to inform the work that NHS England is leading on the long-term plan.

It is also particularly important—it is potentially by accident—that the debate takes place on the day that the RCN produced a document, to which the Secretary of State and I have committed to respond. The shadow Minister is right: I deliberately took the time before the debate to meet a number of the students. I heard at first hand a number of their concerns, and I said to them that I hope we will perhaps understand this, given his remarks about retention at the start of his speech—how important I think retention is, not only of nurses but of Ministers as well.
Vicky Ford: I am delighted that the Minister met the RCN and nursing students this morning. Will he confirm that hearing the voices of students themselves is absolutely vital in making decisions on the future?

Stephen Hammond: Of course it is important. As my hon. Friend will know, as Members, and particularly as Ministers, we get all sorts of briefings, which are very helpful and contain lots of numbers, but not real-life experience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about the experience of nurses at his hospital. He made the point quite powerfully that there are several common issues that we need to address, but several other issues that are not necessarily common to every experience. It is right that we consider the issues they raise.

Janet Daby: One of my constituents who is a student nurse has been to see me. She is struggling with her student nursing loans. She has two children, and she was literally in tears while telling me her stories about how difficult it is for her—the Student Loans Company is demanding the money back. She is working and has children, and cannot afford to pay back those loans. Does the Minister think that situation is tenable?

Stephen Hammond: I will talk about that issue in more depth later, but if the hon. Lady wishes to write to me, I will look at her constituent’s case. I will point out that the learning support fund already offers a number of opportunities, including child dependants allowance, travel costs and an exceptional hardship allowance. I hope her constituent knows about and is taking advantage of those opportunities.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) asked whether the Government will publish an update on the impact of the reforms. That is currently being worked on with education and health organisations and stakeholders. We will look at the most appropriate way of making sure that, following receipt of the proposals by the RCN, and in the context of the long-term plan and the chapter on workforce planning, the higher education funding review takes place and feeds into that update. We will set that position out in due course—I dare say that the hon. Gentleman and I will debate it in due course as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) described what an excellent training scheme should look like, which was very helpful and powerful. My hon. Friend’s experience as a clinician is invaluable, and hopefully my speech will address a number of the points that she raised. I listened carefully to the asks of my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). Some are in my power and some are not, but she made a point about mature students, and the Government recognise that the number of mature student applications has dropped across the wider higher education sector as well as in nursing. We are working with organisations in the sector to see how we can attract more mature students and whether specific funding can be targeted more effectively towards those students via the learning support fund.

It does not really need saying that, at the national level, the Government understand how important nurses are. We are committed to making sure that the nursing workforce are properly supported and funded. In her contribution, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West made the point that funding to the NHS is increasing: by 2023-24, it will receive £20.5 billion a year more than it currently does, and the Government expect the long-term plan to set out a strategy for the NHS to ensure a sustainable supply of nurses, rolling that supply across the whole range of pathways. We expect NHS England to clearly set out its commitment to the nursing workforce in the long-term plan, and ensure that there is a clear way for that plan to be implemented. A number of significant interventions are already in place to boost the supply of nurses, including training more nurses, offering new routes and enhancing reward packages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham pointed out, there are over 11,900 more nurses on our wards than there were in May 2010.

However, the Government, and I as the new Minister for Health, should never be complacent, so I will set out a few other things that I regard as priorities. Our priority is to get more nurses on to our wards. As has been referred to, the education funding reforms, which moved student nurse funding into the student loans system, were introduced to unlock the cap that constrained the number of pre-registration nursing training places. Those reforms allow more students to gain access to nurse degree training courses. We have announced funding for 5,000 more clinical training places to make sure that those placements can be put in place. We have also increased midwifery training places by more than 3,000 over the next four years, and in 2017, there were 22,575 acceptances—the second-largest number since nursing became a degree-only profession.

It is also important to note that the loans system gives more cash when compared with the bursary system—effectively, up to 25% more. A mature student with two children will receive up to an extra £7,500 a year. I recognise that a number of other things need to be, and should be, put in place and known about more widely. The Government have also targeted support for healthcare students on courses through the learning support fund, which provides additional non-repayable grants. Up to £1,000 is available for eligible students in childcare allowances and hardship funding provisions. None of that, of course, was available under the bursary scheme. More nurses are in training, and the Government are working with Health Education England and the university sector to ensure that students continue to apply for nursing courses up to the end of clearing this year. I am pleased to say that, this year, we have seen a 6% increase in the number of 18-year-olds applying for courses and being accepted.

As an hon. Friend pointed out, there continues to be strong demand, specifically for younger people. I have made the point that we need to address the issues faced by more mature students who wish to enter, or re-enter, the profession. That should be a key priority in the long-term plan. The Government, and I as the new Minister, recognise that we need to do much more to continue to encourage people to apply for nursing courses, particularly more mature students. Therefore, my officials are actively engaging with the Royal College of Nursing, the Council of Deans of Health, and Universities UK—all of those organisations have a role to play. The Government will be consulting on the detailed proposals on future funding for higher education that the RCN has put forward today. I said this earlier, but I want to recommit.
and make it clear that we regard those as serious proposals, and will be writing to the RCN to engage on those proposals. We will start that work straightaway.

**Paul Blomfield:** I appreciate that the Minister is new to his post, and that it may be more appropriate for him to write to me in response to this point. I wonder whether he will address the attrition rates question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). There is a relationship between the falling number of applications, the funding regime, and the higher attrition rates. Does the Minister have numbers on that, and what consideration are the Government giving to it?

**Stephen Hammond:** Inspiration has just reached me. As the hon. Gentleman will know, Health Education England recently published a report on attrition rates on nursing courses—I made the point earlier that the rate of attrition among all people applying for university places has gone down. However, I will write to the hon. Gentleman. The report published by Health Education England describes how attrition rates on those courses have fallen considerably over the past few years, but I will write to him to be absolutely clear. He may then choose to make that letter available.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** “The nursing workforce” report, which was published by the Select Committee on Health in January, identified that 30% of students due to complete in 2015-16 or 2016-17 did not complete within that period. Significant variability between different training institutions was also identified. Will the Minister commit to looking at why some institutions have such high attrition rates compared with others?

**Stephen Hammond:** That is an extremely important point. There is not necessarily a universal reason why particular institutions have worse attrition rates than others, and that may well be key to retaining people who wish to stay in the profession.

In my last minute, I will finish on this point: NHS England, NHS Improvement and Health Education England are all working with trusts on a range of recruitment, retention and return-to-practice programmes. Some of those have met with some success: NHS Improvement’s retention programme works directly with trusts to support improvements in retention. However, I want to make clear that, as the newest member of the Government and of the Department, I regard the retention of our NHS professionals as a priority, and I am looking forward to making a contribution not only to things like the “Talk Health and Care” platform, through which there has already been positive engagement, but on this matter more generally. Retention is key, and we want to make sure nurses understand that we recognise how important they are. The long-term plan will set out a strategy to ensure a more sustainable future supply of nurses. They work incredibly hard, and it is absolutely right that this Government will commit to ensure that funding is dedicated to the supply—

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

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### Plastics: Agriculture

**[Sir Christopher Chope in the Chair]**

4 pm

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the use of plastics in agriculture.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

My constituents in North Cornwall are incredibly concerned about the environment, for a number of reasons. Perhaps most importantly, it is because we are a coastal constituency with a great deal of communities reliant on the sea, like the Minister’s constituency of Suffolk Coastal. It might also be because of the beautiful inland landscape of our countryside. Arguably the biggest threat to the environment, other than the ice caps melting, is the plastic in our seas and environments.

The invention of modern plastics transformed the world. It sped up processing and changed entirely how we store everything from food to medicine and how we wrap bulk items. However, with all the good that plastic has done in ease of use, it now poses an imminent threat. We all know that plastic is not biodegradable, and that is now coming at a price to our environment. The most noticeable damage being done to us in North Cornwall is undoubtedly plastic in the ocean. Around two months ago, I asked the Foreign and Commonwealth Office a question about marine conservation in which I congratulated Lewis Pugh on his mammoth swim from Land’s End to Dover. He did that to raise awareness of the tide of plastic we now find pouring into our oceans.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate and raising this issue. Does he agree that quite a lot of the issues are caused by commercial waste collectors that do not make plastic recycling easy, particularly for businesses?

**Scott Mann:** The hon. Lady makes an exceptionally good point. I will come on to talk about the environmental impact of industrial plastics later on. There needs to be a wider debate about not only residential waste but commercial waste.

Just last month, The Guardian reported that microplastic fragments are now finding their way into human stool samples. It is incredibly worrying that plastic is now entering the human food chain. Polypropylene and polyethylene terephthalate were the plastics most commonly found. Although there is still little data on the long-term implications of those microplastics for the human body, it is causing serious concern.

Our food comes from our agricultural industry, which we rely heavily on. It relies on the use of plastics, and it is there that I believe we can make some progress. Plastics and the environment is a key issue in my constituency and for future generations. I am sure many Members have similar talks when they go into their local primary and secondary schools, but when I visit schools in my constituency, the first question they ask me, after my favourite football team—it is Plymouth Argyle, by the way—is always an environmental one. Often it is about plastics.
I certainly welcome the amazing progress that the Government have already made. We have made a commitment to leave the environment in a better place than we found it. We have seen progress in legislation to tackle the scourge of plastics in our environment. We implemented the ban on the manufacture of products containing microbeads, and the coalition introduced the 5p carrier bag charge. At the time, I was slightly sceptical about that, but it has definitely changed behaviour, taking 9 billion bags out of circulation. There are the recent proposals for a bottle deposit scheme, which I welcome, and a ban on the sale of plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds. Most recently, the Chancellor has announced consultation on a world-leading tax on plastic packaging that does not include at least 30% recycled content.

Those policies are part of a cultural change in how the public view single-use plastics, and around the country we are seeing great examples of how that is coming about through grassroots organisations. Penzance recently became the first town in the country to go plastic-free, and was declared as such by Surfers Against Sewage. That was achieved by Penzance residents coming together and thinking of creative new ways of replacing plastics. For example, they have started to use food boxes made of starch. I commend the people of Penzance for their great achievement.

I welcome the nation’s action on the issue of plastics in the environment, but I want to focus specifically on plastics in the agricultural sector. In rural communities such as North Cornwall, plastics are used heavily on farms. In fact, PlasticsEurope, an association of plastic manufacturers, says on its website:

“A wide range of plastics are used in agriculture”.

Those include polyolefin and polyethylene, which tend to be used in mulch to protect saplings and conserve water. Polypropylene is used to make woven sacks for storage. Ethylene-vinyl acetate is used for sealing packaging. Polyvinyl chloride is used for plastic pipes for irrigation. Those are just a few examples of the plastics used in the agricultural space.

Those plastics provide innovative but not always sustainable ways of managing crops. Plastic irrigation pipes prevent the wasting of water and nutrients. Rainwater can be retained more effectively in plastic reservoirs. The use of pesticides can be greatly reduced by keeping crops in a closed space such as a greenhouse or by mulching under plastic film. Moreover, pesticide emissions into the atmosphere are reduced by having a fixed plastic cover in place.

At the end of their life cycle, agricultural plastics such as greenhouse covers can be recycled. Once retrieved from the fields, other plastics have to be washed to eliminate sand, herbicides and pesticides before they are ground up and extruded into pellets. That in itself is quite environmentally intensive, but the material can then be used again in the manufacturing of such things as outdoor furniture. When recycling is not viable, energy can be obtained from agricultural plastic waste through co-combustion. The recent call for evidence by Her Majesty’s Treasury on single-use plastics, “Tackling the plastic problem”, was intended to explore how changes to the tax system or charges could be introduced to reduce the amount of single-use plastics.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that dealing with plastics through incineration is 12 times less fuel-efficient than burning the original stock fuel?

Scott Mann: I have learned something today. I was not aware of that. The whole principle is that reusing plastics rather than burning them is a much better way of dealing with the scourge we have in the environment.

I know the Government are keen to explore new and innovative measures in this area. The National Farmers Union recently said that it recognises the potential for new production opportunities in the industry and would like to see some Government action. It said:

“However, it is important that food safety and quality are not compromised”.

It wants “to encourage the phase-out of single-use plastics. Agriculture is responsible for only a small proportion of plastic packaging waste.”

We clearly need to find a way to make agriculture more environmentally friendly without putting a heavy burden on our fantastic farmers. In some cases, farmers have taken the initiative. For example, plastic mulches took over from materials such as straw leaves and wood chips as they are more effective to install in large-scale indoor animal enclosures, but there are cases of financially viable modern-day farms that have turned their back on single-use plastics and have gone organic to cover crops. I was recently made aware by the Horticultural Trades Association that its new plant pots are recyclable and do not contain any carbon pigment. The Government need to get behind a move to organic materials, or at least material that can be recycled. A further problem to which we need a solution is that some farms are remote and struggle to get a private contractor to come in and collect waste. That sometimes leads to farmers burning waste, which has a huge impact on the environment and is not the right way forward.

I originally came up with the concept for today’s debate after visiting a constituent called Phil who runs Kernow Farm Plastics in Cornwall. His business is part of the national farmers recycling service, which operates across the whole of the south-west. Kernow Farm Plastics offers a service to farmers to collect and recycle their agricultural plastics. Phil took me round for half a day to show me his business and to educate me—it really was a bit of an education—on the different kinds of plastics in agriculture and their environmental impact.

One thing that is not made of biodegradable material, and which I am particularly concerned about, is net wrap, which is used to tie large bales of hay. It is not the plastic coating that goes around the outside—the black stuff. Net wrap holds the bale in place, and is made up of a very thin strand of non-recyclable plastic. It is terrible for wildlife and the marine environment, and ultimately could find its way into watercourses and then into the sea. That is my main focus in the debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand to let him know about an innovative scheme. My local council, Ards and North Down Borough Council, yesterday became the first in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to install a marine sea bin, which has the capacity to sieve 2 million litres of sea water annually and trap plastics in its mesh.
The sea bins cost about £3,500 each, and use a low-energy motor that can be run for about £1 a day. Each bin can capture 3 tonnes of litter a year, and 70% of each unit is made of recyclable plastic. Does he agree that such initiatives can and must be recognised and encouraged? Ards and North Down Borough Council, as the first council in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to install a sea bin, is leading the way.

Scott Mann: I absolutely agree. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a great champion of his community, including his fishing community. Like me, he understands that our marine environment is vital. I hope that we see more of those schemes around the country.

We need to find biodegradable and organic alternatives to net wrap. The original alternative was binder twine. We used to see lots of twine used for tying bales, but that seems to be less prevalent now. Twine has traditionally been more durable than plastic, but is prone to rotting away. It is not nearly as suited to the job as plastic. In many industries, plastic has been seen as a much more effective alternative, but not necessarily for the environment.

Net wrap is a key example of where we need an alternative that is easy and safe to recycle. It is unacceptable for us to continue to use this stuff on an industrial scale when we could use something that is recyclable. My ask of the Minister and the Department is that they set up a research and development fund to try to find a way of ensuring that all plastic farming materials can be recycled, and to encourage viable alternative organic production methods wherever possible so that we do not end up with plastics in our environment, among our wildlife and in our oceans.

We need to make the debate on plastics as wide as possible so that we can get the best results, and I know that the Minister gets that. It has been a pleasure to take part in today’s debate, and I am really looking forward to listening to the Minister’s response.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing the debate. I recognise the extensive introduction he gave to the marine impact of a lot of plastic getting into rivers and oceans. I fully share those concerns, and we are working exceptionally hard in a number of ways to tackle that important issue. However, I will mainly address his questions about the use of plastic in agriculture.

The Government share concerns about plastic waste polluting our environment from all sources, including agriculture. Our priority is to prevent plastic from entering the environment in the first place. My hon. friend will be aware that the overarching ambition is to achieve zero avoidable plastic waste over the lifetime of the 25-year environment plan, but ideally sooner.

As a material, plastics are incredibly useful and versatile, as my hon. friend mentioned. They are flexible and durable and have a multitude of uses in the agricultural sector. Plastic is used on farms for a variety of purposes, including wrapping hay and silage bales, transporting feed and fertiliser, and insulating soil and horticultural crops. Wrapping animal feed such as silage, hay and straw in plastic protects it from the weather and saves time while baling. It is a handy way to store valuable feed that is used to feed stock through the winter.

Removing the wrap from hay bales can be a burden for farmers. Failure to do so, and to dispose of it properly, means that animals can sometimes eat the plastic wrapping and injure themselves when it enters their rumen. We urge farmers and agricultural workers to take responsibility for their waste, and to follow guidance to ensure that they capture plastic waste and deal with it properly. A coalition of groups has published information to help farmers and land managers to do the right thing with agricultural waste as part of the “right waste, right place” campaign. That campaign was sponsored by the Environment Agency and supported by the National Farmers Union among others.

Plastic wrap used for hay bales can be recycled, and the infrastructure exists within the country to manage that. However, contamination levels, the relatively high costs of collection and other costs associated with cleaning plastic waste before it can be recycled mean that demand for farm plastic waste is very low. I recognise and welcome the valuable work of operators in the farming sector who are taking proactive steps to recycle farm plastic waste. For example, yesterday Grassroots Recycling organised a meeting that brought together the NFU, the Environment Agency and 10 farm waste collectors, including Kernow Farm Plastics Ltd, to which my hon. friend referred, and Agri Cycle Ltd, to consider the challenges for recycling farm plastics.

As my hon. friend laid out, it is important that such a service is available to the farming community right around the country in order to help farmers deal with some of their regulatory requirements. He will be aware that, if a farmer chooses to sell a bale of hay, they need to participate in the packaging recovery note system, although if it just gets reused on their own land they do not need to because it is just a transfer of product.

It is fair to say that there were concerns that the end markets are challenging at this time, particularly as recycling processes tend to take plastic waste from other sources, given the issues that I outlined. I must admit that today is the first time that I have heard somebody talk specifically about the problem of net wrap. After my hon. friend’s eloquent explanation of the challenges in how it is used, I fully understand his concerns about how net wrap in particular could easily become part of the litter that ends up going into watercourses, having the impact to which he referred.

My hon. friend mentioned the possibility of a research and development fund to look at alternatives. There is an opportunity for people to apply for funding from our plastics innovation fund, which is led by Innovate UK under the steering of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. He will be aware that there are many producers, so this is a good challenge.

As we announced in the Budget, we are introducing what is effectively a new tax for plastic products that are not at least 30% recycled. There may be a possibility to apply such measures to wider plastic wrap as well as the net wrap. However, I am conscious of what my hon. friend said about alternatives. I strongly agree that, just as we are looking at alternative uses for plastics industrially as well as recreationally, there may well be more we can do once the opportunity for innovation is explored.
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentions money for research into plastic wrapping, but there is also a problem with plastic mulching. We do not know what effect plastic mulch may have when it gets into watercourses, rivers and seas, but it is a potential source of microplastics and it may also go straight into the soil. It could be a widespread problem, but there is a lack of research into plastic mulching and a lack of knowledge about its effects.

Dr Coffey: I had never heard the phrase “plastic mulching” before either, but I am conscious of what the hon. Gentleman suggests. Elements of plastic can end up in the natural environment in different and unintended ways. Some broader research has been done into the impact of plastics, but I recognise that there is more to do. I think Public Health England has been considering the matter.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I welcome what the Minister says about encouraging biodegradable fibres and bioplastics, but until those materials are available more widely, we will need a domestic solution to recycling. China is now refusing to take plastic waste, and other Asian countries may follow suit. Recycling plastic has recently become more complicated and expensive than ever before, so I hope that she will say what the Government are doing to encourage domestic recycling solutions.

Dr Coffey: The reality is that until now, China, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries have largely been happy to accept our plastic because they have seen it as a raw material that they can use to generate more products. Plastic recycling is technically possible and exists in this country already—it is just that it is not as economical. People have to pay to recycle various sources of plastic rather than getting a benefit from them, although that is changing. We recognise that China has reduced the amount of contamination that it is prepared to accept in plastic—it does not ignore all plastic, but effectively it has closed the market and made it less worth while. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall that innovation is vital in supporting developments to tackle plastic waste, so we will continue to explore commercially viable options.

Beyond the farm, we have worked with retailers and with the Waste and Resources Action Programme to explore the potential for introducing plastic-free initiatives. At the end of the month, WRAP will publish a technical report on the evidence for providing fresh produce. Its purpose is to inform a dialogue on providing uncut fresh fruit and vegetables loose, and it will contain advice on how to eliminate unnecessary plastic packaging without unintentionally increasing food waste. I am sure that the famous cucumber scenario will be mentioned many times in the discussions about whether plastic is a benefit or a horror. The opposite environmental aspect that we need to consider is food waste, especially in regard to carbon. The technical report will be available for consideration and discussion by signatories to the 2025 Courtauld commitment and the UK plastics pact.

The Government want to create a vibrant market for recycled materials in the UK, including plastic. We want to increase the quantity and quality of materials collected by local authorities in England and accelerate greater consistency. My hon. Friend referred to biodegradable materials, which may be seen as a solution that would reduce the impact of plastic waste. However, if disposed of incorrectly, they can be more environmentally damaging than non-biodegradable materials. We are concerned that, in the absence of standards, claims about the biodegradability of plastic-based products cannot be verified, which has the potential to lead to confusion in the marketplace, increased levels of consumption and environmental harm at the point of disposal.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on plastic. Some may see it as a niche issue, but he is fully aware of its importance and I congratulate him on all his work and campaigning. The issue needs to be tackled at the source in every possible way, and we need constantly to challenge ourselves, our agricultural industry and other similar industries to do so.

Question put and agreed to.
Leaving the EU: Legal Services

4.26 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the provision of legal services after the UK leaves the EU.

Mr Djanogly: My hon. Friend makes another very important point.

English law is the most widely used legal system in the world—27% of the world’s 320 legal jurisdictions use it. There are more than 200 foreign law firms with offices in the UK, from more than 40 jurisdictions. The UK legal services sector is forecast to produce turnover of £30.82 billion and net exports of £4.25 billion by 2025.

Brexit will be the largest ever change to the UK’s legal framework and it represents both opportunities and risks for the legal sector. The impact of Brexit on lawyers, law firms and legal practices will be significant. Negotiations around the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union and the transition period have been agreed, but questions remain, especially about the future relationship of the UK and the EU.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Legal services amount to the equivalent of 1.5% of GDP. Both the Bar Council and the Law Society have issued warnings that any form of Brexit will have a significant impact on the sector. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it would be better for the legal services sector if we remained in a single market?

Mr Djanogly: Yes, and the hon. Lady is going to hear me explain why the legal services sector is so important to our economy.

The legal services sector is a great UK success story. The UK has the second largest legal services market in the world—27% of the world’s 320 legal jurisdictions use it. Our legal services sector makes a contribution of about £25.7 billion per annum to the economy. It is really significant for our economic well-being.

Mr Djanogly: My hon. Friend makes another very important point.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. Surely one of the biggest threats to the UK comes from Singapore, which is developing a good range of courts to tackle commercial issues. I have raised the subject on several occasions, but there does not appear to be a united Government front to see off the threat from Singapore.

Mr Djanogly: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Other jurisdictions are also mounting challenges. We must avoid doing anything that might impair the reputation of the sector.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My hon. Friend talks of the reputation of the sector. It is also about hard cash. At the end of the day, the legal services sector makes a contribution of about £25.7 billion per annum to the economy. It is really significant for our economic well-being.

Before I launch into Brexit issues, let me explain why the legal services sector is so important to our economy. The legal services sector is a great UK success story. The UK has the second largest legal services market in the world and the largest legal services sector in the EU. In 2017, it contributed more than £26 billion to the economy—equivalent to 1.5% of GDP—and was responsible for net trade of some £4 billion. It employs and trains over 380,000 people.

The jurisdiction of England and Wales is recognised as a global centre for legal services, particularly for international, commercial and corporate transactions, and dispute resolution and arbitration. In 2015, more than 22,000 commercial and civil disputes were resolved through arbitration, mediation and adjudication in the UK. In the commercial court, which is housed in its new, modern building, nearly 1,100 claims were issued, of which two thirds involved at least one party whose address was outside England and Wales.

Our legal services sector is a great international success story, but we have no natural right to retain that business. Indeed, over the past 10 years several jurisdictions have sought to compete with England and Wales. We keep the work because of the excellence of our professional lawyers and judges and because of foreign parties’ trust in our rule of law and our reputation for judicial efficiency and fairness.

Mr Djanogly: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. Surely one of the biggest threats to the UK comes from Singapore, which is developing a good range of courts to tackle commercial issues. I have raised the subject on several occasions, but there does not appear to be a united Government front to see off the threat from Singapore.

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Mr Djanogly: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Other jurisdictions are also mounting challenges. We must avoid doing anything that might impair the reputation of the sector.

Mr Djanogly: That is exactly what I shall be doing.

The legal sector has broadly welcomed the Government’s negotiating stance so far. However, concerns remain that withdrawal from the EU and our future relationship will not deliver in a number of key areas for legal services. There are concerns over whether the Government’s current approach will deliver sustainable market access for legal services and flexibility for services. Unlike financial services, there is no in-depth common rulebook or Europe-wide regulator in legal services. Instead, legal services remain regulated autonomously by each EU member state, while functioning on the principle that an EU law firm should be treated as equal to domestic lawyers and firms. There is therefore no great benefit for the legal sector in maintaining regulatory flexibility when pursuing trade agreements with third countries.

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I would point out, from my time on the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, that that is the view of most service industries. They have every intention of following EU rules whether they are mandated to or not, because that is what their business dictates. Certainly, from a legal services perspective, the preservation of the present system should be prioritised, so that lawyers from EU member states, European economic area states and Switzerland can practise freely across the continent.

The APPG inquiry focused on mutual market access and on how legal services will be able to operate following the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union. We accepted written evidence and held sessions in Parliament to hear oral evidence from interested parties, including
law firms and chambers, individual practitioners and other stakeholders. We sought evidence on the impact of Brexit on legal practices, the workforce, business structures and client bases. We explored how lawyers currently practise across borders, looking at everything from rules on immigration and practice rights to the recognition of professional qualifications, and how that is anticipated to be affected by Brexit. We sought to understand where contingency planning was taking place and what steps firms were already taking to mitigate any effect of Brexit on the sector. We sought to understand the key concerns of the sector about the effect of Brexit, and we published the final report in October—if anyone wants a copy, I have some. It explored the concerns and comments raised in the oral and written evidence.

We made 10 recommendations. First, the Government should ensure that mutual market access is retained, as currently envisaged, in any transitional arrangements. Secondly, we urge the Government to seek to retain mutual market access as far as possible in any future relationship with the European Union. Thirdly, the Government should ensure that UK lawyers are able to continue to serve their clients post-Brexit on what is called a fly-in, fly-out basis. Fourthly, the Government should ensure that any future relationship with the EU includes a mechanism for UK lawyers to practise EU law via the mutual recognition of professional qualifications and law firm structures. Fifthly, the Government should seek to secure the rights of audience in EU courts, such as the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Sixthly, it is vital that, following Brexit, the Government provides for the ability of the legal sector to easily recruit skilled individuals from outside the UK. Seventhly, the Government should ensure that our immigration system does not block lawyers from continuing to provide services in the EU. Eighthly, the Government and the EU should agree on the draft withdrawal agreement as soon as possible to ensure a transition period that provides legal certainty—that one, hopefully, gets a tick. Ninthly, any transitional agreement should replicate the current legal framework as far as possible to ensure legal certainty and prevent businesses and individuals from having to adapt to changes in their rights and obligations twice—once during a transitional phase and once upon implementation of a new UK-EU agreement. Tenthly, a no-deal scenario should be avoided at all costs.

Let me address a few of those points, taking first the ability to practise, mutual recognition of professional qualifications and rights of audience. Of key concern to the legal sector was the ability to practise in Europe. The current framework, which allows for the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, rights of audience and the ability to practise and establish firms in EU member states, has hugely benefited the UK legal services sector, providing a large net contribution to the UK economy, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill). As far as possible, mutual market access should be retained.

Ellie Reeves: The withdrawal agreement does of course refer to mutual recognition, but only for the transition period. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that creates further uncertainty for the legal profession, which, as has been pointed out, already contributes so much to our economy?

Mr Djanogly: I will be making the case that the hon. Lady has just put.

On labour mobility, the legal services sector has profited from the ability to attract talent from across the globe and the ability to work in the European Union. Frankly, many people going into the offices of a City law firm would be staggered by the number of nationalities and the depth of EU and world legal experience that we have in the UK. For instance, an American client would quite commonly run its European company acquisition strategy from London—because we speak English, yes, but also because they trust our jurisdiction and courts, and because we have European expertise here in London. We do not want to lose that. It is very important that a labour mobility framework that guarantees those abilities post-Brexit is put in place.

The legal services sector requires legal certainty throughout the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union. Law firms and their clients are already, sadly, beginning to implement contingency plans and move business elsewhere. We now have a draft of a detailed transition agreement, and the sector believes, as I do, that that agreement must be confirmed as soon as possible to ensure the sector has the legal certainty that it requires.

Robert Neill: Does my hon. Friend agree that having a swift and clear transition agreement is important not just, as he rightly says, to give law firms the certainty they need to continue their operations, but to ensure for their clients contractual continuity and, above all, the enforceability of contracts and judgments in commercial matters and a whole range of other matters?

Mr Djanogly: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. Avoiding a no-deal scenario and securing the right future relationship with the European Union is of the utmost importance. The APPG supports the view of the legal services sector that a no-deal scenario would be devastating to the sector and should be avoided at all costs. Of course, there have been significant recent developments. Last week, on 14 November, the Cabinet collectively agreed to the draft withdrawal agreement and the political statement on the future relationship. Following a special European Council meeting on 25 November, the Government intend to lay a final version of the agreement before Parliament for debate. It needs to be recognised that the draft withdrawal agreement contains a number of positive elements for the legal services sector, including provisions on mutual recognition of professional qualifications and on lawyers continuing to obtain qualifications throughout the transition period, and clarity on continued recognition and enforcement of judgments and orders throughout that period. Lawyers will continue to have the right to represent a party in proceedings before the CJEU in all stages of proceedings where a case can be brought by or against the UK. The automatic transfer of an EU intellectual property right into an equivalent UK right before the end of the transition period is very welcome.

The non-legally binding declaration, however, is a work in progress. To be frank, it is worryingly brief and it is vague on services, especially legal services. The relevant part of the political declaration explains that the goal is to secure

“Ambitious, comprehensive and balanced arrangements on trade in services and investment, delivering a level of liberalisation in trade in services well beyond the Parties’ WTO commitments”.

It says that the Government will put in place

“Appropriate arrangements on professional qualifications.”
I have to say that this is pretty sketchy stuff, and so we continue to have concerns about the lack of detail contained within the political declaration between the UK and the EU.

First, it is pretty unambitious for the UK-EU agreement to say only that it will go “well beyond” the parties’ World Trade Organisation commitments, and it is likely to lead to significantly less market access for services. Secondly, like with the Government’s White Paper, there are concerns about the continued focus on regulatory flexibility, as I mentioned before. The preservation of the present system, whereby lawyers from EU member states, EEA states and Switzerland can practise freely across the continent, should be prioritised instead. Thirdly, it is good to see a reference to professional qualifications, but that only goes some way towards giving lawyers the ability to practise in the EU, and generally it is not their preferred route.

Fourthly, it is disappointing not to see a reference either to civil or commercial co-operation, unlike in the Government’s White Paper. The UK and the EU currently enjoy the gold standard in civil and judicial co-operation, which should continue. Fifthly, without an agreement on judicial co-operation, judgments made in UK courts might be unenforceable in EU countries in the cross-border settlement of trade disputes, which might result, for instance, in debts owed by EU entities to UK businesses not being recovered. It follows that uncertainty about whether judgments from UK courts would be enforced could make the UK less appealing as a jurisdiction of choice for contracts and dispute resolution, which would lead to the growth of competing jurisdictions.

**John Howell:** My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. I am not sure that I heard him mention the family courts in his list of things that we need to establish good relationships over. The family courts are very important, because sadly the amount of work that they undertake—on both sides of the channel—is growing. There is enormous mutual responsibility for them.

**Mr Djanogly:** I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. The Brussels II regulation is a single legal instrument that helps families resolve disputes about divorce and the custody of children where they involve parties in more than one EU state. Under the regulation, EU courts automatically recognise judgments on matrimonial and parental responsibility that are delivered in other states. That will no longer apply to the UK when we have left the EU. Similarly, the maintenance regulation, which helps to ensure the payment of maintenance in cross-border situations, will no longer apply. In a no-deal scenario, the UK and EU27’s trading relationships in legal services would be governed by the general agreement on trade in services, or GATS, which falls far short of replicating the current EU framework. UK lawyers would be subject to myriad rules and regulations in each of the 31 European Free Trade Association states rather than to a single legal framework. UK judgments are automatically recognised and enforced across the EU27, but they will not be in a no-deal scenario, unless the UK unilaterally signs The Hague convention.

At the moment, clients can receive UK law advice from UK lawyers however and wherever they want in the EU: in a no-deal scenario, clients in some jurisdictions might be limited in how they can receive UK legal advice from UK lawyers. Currently UK lawyers have the automatic right to set up practices in an EU host state with minimal bureaucracy; in a no-deal scenario, UK lawyers’ ability to set up practices in an EU27 jurisdiction will depend on local laws and regulations. If establishment is possible, permitted activities still might be limited.

Currently UK lawyers have the right to advise clients who are based in the EU27 on EU law, because their legal professional qualifications are automatically recognised. In a no-deal scenario, clients based in EU27 jurisdictions might no longer be able to receive EU law advice from UK lawyers, as UK legal professional qualifications might not be recognised. Now, law firms can set up in one EU member state and export their services across the EU by establishing branches of the same structure in other member states. In a no-deal scenario, legal entities would lose the automatic right to use their preferred business structures in certain EU27 countries, and the UK’s corporate form of limited liability partnerships might no longer be accepted in some jurisdictions. As can be seen, we must avoid a no-deal scenario.

Growing concern that the UK could exit the EU without a deal has led the Law Society to publish a series of papers that give solicitors guidance on how to take steps to mitigate some of the risks. Law cuts across every area of life, and often UK and EU lawyers work across borders and enforce and litigate on family, data or business disputes. The first tranche of Law Society papers give advice on some of the potential rule changes where a deal between a business here and in the EU goes wrong, what happens in family law if a couple splits up, and how we should approach data sharing should we quit the EU without an agreement. There is another paper on providing legal services in the EU, and I understand that further papers are in production. Perhaps the Minister could take this opportunity to explain how her Department is preparing itself and the legal services sector for a no-deal scenario.

It is fair to say that services, including legal services, have not been given the same attention in the Brexit process as manufactured goods have. The sector wants a bespoke agreement that comprehensively covers legal services and is based on mutual market access, mutual recognition of regulatory frameworks, regulatory co-operation and continued mutual access to talent. I have high regard for the Minister, her understanding of this sector and her ability. I hope that she takes the opportunity provided by this debate to set out how she will champion the English legal services sector in negotiations on the future relationship with the EU, with the intention that legal services are not left behind and will be given the tools to maintain their world-leading reputation for excellence after Brexit.

**4.48 pm**

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I will not speak for very long, but I want to raise an important point about international arbitration while wearing my hat as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution, which looks at arbitration, mediation and other forms of dispute resolution.
I was pleased to see that the withdrawal agreement commits us to international arbitration to resolve any disputes between us and the European Union as we exit it. That is a very positive step forward and a good compromise to have received from the European Union. I pay tribute to the authors of the withdrawal agreement for getting the EU to agree to that. I put so much emphasis on international arbitration because it is arguably a cheaper and much quicker way of resolving disputes. As we have heard, we are a leading centre for arbitration, as the number of people who come to us from around the world indicates. They do that because of our distinguished judges and arbitrators, and because English law is admired around the world.

I raised that issue with the Lord Chief Justice this week, and I asked him how secure he is in believing that we will be able to continue with this regime after Brexit. He said, first, that it is difficult to see it continuing unless we do something about the fact that the number of judges is so diminished at the moment. That is a very important point. Arbitration is not solely based on judges, but we need judges with a great deal of experience.

The second thing he said—I made this point in an intervention—is that we need to be more aware of the alternative centres that are emerging around the world to deal with arbitration. I mentioned Singapore, which has put tremendous effort into developing a commercial solution. I hope that in the summer recess—assuming we still have one—I will be able to go out to Singapore to see for myself how its arbitration courts work and what sort of cases they deal with. We should be concentrating on those important things.

My hon. Friend, the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) said that legal services make an enormous contribution to the UK’s economic activity. I will not repeat what he said about them, other than to underline their phenomenal contribution.

I want much more emphasis to be put on tying up the elements that I have mentioned. We should not take for granted our legal position as the pre-eminent jurisdiction in the world. Our officials need some fight to ensure that we keep our jurisdiction and our reputation so that we can continue with that.

I stress the importance of ensuring that we have some sort of reciprocal arrangement for the family courts. My hon. Friend mentioned Brussels II and the maintenance regulations that apply to it. It is not the ideal form of governance of the situation with the European Union, but it is undoubtedly better than what preceded it, and we should be very careful about throwing it out.

I was disappointed not to see more in the withdrawal agreement about the protection of legal services. There is a gap there. It would have been nice to see more about how they will operate in the new environment and about how qualifications will continue to be recognised beyond the transition period. Those points have already been made, but I am happy to make them again because they are important and we need an answer.

4.54 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) on securing the debate. I congratulate the all-party group on legal and constitutional affairs on its excellent report, which mirrors the Justice Committee’s conclusions in our report in the 2016-17 Session on the implications of Brexit for the justice system, especially in the areas that relate to co-operation in civil and commercial law. Our report, of course, went further and stressed the importance of continuing co-operation on criminal law and law enforcement, but our conclusions on the civil front are exactly in line with those of the all-party group. That is not surprising, because the evidence is entirely consistent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who serves on the Committee with me, stressed the other issue that we want to raise: family law. This is not just about the clients of big commercial firms. The ability to enforce judgments makes a difference to parents who are seeking to get maintenance from a partner in another EU jurisdiction. At the moment they can enforce their maintenance agreement without any difficulty, but they would be at a grave disadvantage if they were not able to do so.

Many of us will remember the problems that arose in the past with the growth of what is called parallel litigation in family cases, in relation to divorce, financial arrangements and child custody arrangements. The last thing we want is a crash-out arrangement. In theory, that would mean that, as of 1 April next year, a parent in the UK and one in another EU jurisdiction would be capable of commencing parallel proceedings in family matters.

John Howell: My hon. Friend is stressing the role of the family courts, but he might also want to mention the ability to handle child abduction equally on both sides.

Robert Neill: That is entirely right. Some of the worst examples, before we developed the mutual enforceability of judgments, related to child abduction. In cases involving non-EU states, in which we are a third country, the parent here—frequently the mother—was at a significant legal disadvantage and did not have the protections that we have under the current arrangements, particularly the recast Brussels arrangements. I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised that issue.

I want to make two other points very briefly. First, I support my hon. Friend’s point about English law. Those of us who have practised know that, because of the reputation of our system, it is almost the norm to find English law clauses in international contracts. We want that to continue, but it is concerning that the Bar Council and the Law Society have been reporting evidence—so far anecdotal, but strong—that the uncertainty and the risk of a crash-out arrangement without contractual continuity is leading some firms to advise their clients to have clauses excluding English law from contracts. It would be extremely troubling if that were to persist. The longer the uncertainty, the greater the risk.

Simmons & Simmons, a leading law firm, conducted a survey of clients in Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands to look at what the courts in those countries might adopt if we were a third country and could not rely on the current arrangements. It reported that 88% of clients—people abroad buying British services—thought that the Government needed to make an early public statement to remove uncertainty, and 50% said that, without that, they would be inclined to move away from choosing English law or jurisdiction clauses. The situation is urgent, so I will back the
withdrawal agreement because it will get us into a transitional arrangement, which will give continuity for that period. More importantly, contracts will run beyond the date on which we leave, and significant commercial litigation will almost certainly take more than two years to work its way through. I hope that those issues will also be taken on board.

Will the Minister consider a couple of suggestions by the City of London Corporation and TheCityUK, to which I am grateful, about failsafe devices—I do not like to use the word “backstop”, because it has certain controversial associations—that we could have in parallel with seeking to get the withdrawal agreement through and get into the transition period? It has been suggested that it would be reasonable to look at a means of copying the text of the Rome I and Rome II regulations into our own private international law. Those regulations, of course, determine the applicable law for contractual obligations. As well as seeking the transition, many lawyers think it would be advisable to copy those texts—in parallel, I suggest, as a belt and braces operation—which are much superior to anything that went before, into our law. It is also important that we consider re-signing The Hague convention as an independent party. That would be a failsafe, not my preferred objective, but we need to have those eventualities in mind. That would assist with certainty.

In her Mansion House speech, the Prime Minister talked about the Lugano convention. I think that most people would concede that Lugano, in its original form, is nothing like as good or effective as Brussels I and II in their recast form. They are the gold standard that my people would concede that Lugano, in its original form, talked about the Lugano convention. I think that most assist with certainty.

Robert Neill: The Prime Minister said today, so that it makes more reference to the next stage, as I hope she does, it is absolutely critical that that detail is fleshed out at the earliest stage. I hope that we will take the opportunity of strengthening the political declaration that comes as part of the package with the withdrawal agreement, as the Prime Minister said today, so that it makes more reference to legal services in particular.

5.2 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) on securing such an important debate, and I will touch on some of his remarks. He mentioned that the legal services sector contributed £26 billion to the economy. Like him, I look forward to hearing the Minister outline what her Department is doing to prepare for a hard Brexit, should that occur on 29 March.

My colleague on the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), mentioned a point made by Lord Chief Justice on the paucity of judges in the English system, which has come up from time to time in the Committee’s deliberations. I have made it a habit not to disagree with the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), because he is wise and rarely wrong, and he was right again, particularly when he brought up the potential position of family courts post-Brexit. He also mentioned that the discussion is akin to groundhog day, which I am pleased to tell him is on my birthday, so I look forward to a nice bottle of malt from him.

Robert Neill: Does the hon. Gentleman want single or double?

Gavin Newlands: Whatever the hon. Gentleman can afford; I would be most grateful.

On a more substantive point, we have heard today that Brexit has the capacity to complicate and disrupt every aspect of our lives. Over the decades, European co-operation on justice issues has undoubtedly led to countless criminals and victims getting justice. Brexit seriously risks that successful current arrangement for very little gain. It is vital that the UK Government do everything in their power to ensure that cross-border legal services arrangements are as close as possible to the current arrangements.

At the moment, it is unlikely that the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement will pass the House of Commons. On top of countless other problems, a no-deal Brexit would discard the agreement to have reciprocal recognition of legal qualifications. With their technical notice, the Government have provided something, but it does not provide anywhere near enough clarity on justice arrangements after a no-deal Brexit. I welcome the fact that under the withdrawal agreement, mutual recognition of legal professionals would continue at least during the transition period.

That is just one example that highlights how European Union membership benefits our justice system and society more widely. The Scottish National party will continue to argue that the best course of action for Scotland and the UK’s other constituent nations is full membership of the European Union. Failing that, even single market access via the European economic area and customs union membership would also allow current arrangements to continue unhindered.

We are hurtling rapidly towards a blindfold Brexit, with no clarity on what future arrangements will look like. Despite some of the welcome guarantees, we are still none the wiser about what the arrangements for legal services will look like. We remain gravely concerned
about the future of legal services in Scotland and across the UK after transition. I urge the Minister and the UK Government, in the strongest possible terms, to get their act together and address that urgently in the future partnership arrangements.

No one can know for certain what will happen in the next few months, but it is clear that the Prime Minister will struggle to gain approval for the agreement, and a damaging no-deal Brexit is still a real possibility. As we heard from the hon. Member for Huntingdon in his opening speech, the mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive, the lawyers’ services directive and the lawyers’ establishment directive all provide reciprocal arrangements between EEA states for the recognition of qualifications, creating arrangements for European lawyers to register to practise permanently in another EEA state as a registered European lawyer. As the Government’s technical notice clearly states, if no deal came to pass, those reciprocal arrangements would cease to apply, which would result in a sharp end to them on 29 March. As we have heard in great detail, that would be an unmitigated disaster for law firms and lawyers who operate in the EU.

The Law Society of England and Wales carried out research on Brexit. Some £3 billion could be stripped from the sector’s turnover by 2025 if the UK crashes out of the EU without a deal, and a hard Brexit could cut the legal sector’s rate of growth by half. The UK is a world-leading centre in legal expertise, as we have heard, and that standing could be irrevocably diminished because of Brexit—“global Britain” indeed. The Scottish National party has been consistently clear that freedom of movement and all the advantages that it brings should be allowed to continue in Scotland. Ending freedom of movement will jeopardise the continuing success of the legal sector in a country that voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union. That will be heavily damaging and deeply unfair. It is vital that the legal sector continues to receive the benefits of freedom of movement, and retaining freedom of movement is the simplest way to secure that.

Andrew Langdon, Chair of the Bar, told the Justice Committee that “without the free movement of lawyers nothing else of much importance will be salvaged”, arguing that lawyers’ ability to represent local clients in cases with EU connections is important for the individuals and businesses they represent.

Stakeholders and leading legal experts are desperately calling out for clarity and decisive action from the Government. A sector that is especially vital to the UK economy is under threat, and our lawyers need answers beyond the transition period. If the Prime Minister cannot get an agreement through the House, we seriously risk subjecting the sector to further irreparable damage. It is therefore better to reverse the whole shambolic process and remain in the European Union, so that we would retain the benefits, not only in the justice system but in countless other areas that have enjoyed benefits for decades. At the very least, we should come to an agreement on retaining membership of the single market and the customs union, but if, as I fear, we do not, I suspect many Scots will feel that they have no choice but to exercise their democratic right to regain all those benefits by choosing an independent path of their own within the European Union.

5.8 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) on securing the debate, and thank him for his comprehensive speech, which dealt with the issues and challenges we will face once the Brexit negotiations have been carried out. I commend him on the work that he has done as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on legal and constitutional affairs in the inquiry on the effects of Brexit on legal services.

This has been a thoughtful and considered debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who does a superb job as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alternative dispute resolution. He discussed the need for arbitration and how it, too, is important to UK legal services. I hope we will have further debates, for example on family law protection or the European arrest warrant post-Brexit. Serious concerns have been expressed in all parts of the Chamber.

As we have heard, Brexit will be the largest ever change to the UK’s legal framework; which presents many concerns and risks for the legal sector. Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, we need to ensure that citizens and businesses in the UK continue to have certainty about access to justice in civil, commercial, consumer and family law matters. That requires clarity on the responsibilities of the courts in the United Kingdom and in the European Union, and certainty that judgments can be enforced with a minimum of delay and cost.

The UK legal services market, as the hon. Member for Huntingdon said, is worth anything between £25 billion and £30 billion in total, employs 370,000 people and in 2015 generated an estimated £3.3 billion of net export revenue. Central to that market is the ability of barristers, solicitors and other legal professionals to provide legal services in the European Union. Equally importantly, our exporters’ confidence in doing business abroad depends greatly on the ability of their lawyers to establish and provide services in the countries in which they seek to trade and invest. Numerous aspects of the work of barristers and solicitors will no longer be possible when we leave the European Union, unless existing cross-border rights are preserved.

The Government must therefore have regard to the nature of the legal work that comes to the UK as a result of the UK legal profession’s expertise, not least in European Union law. Will the Minister tell us what measures the Government are taking to maintain cross-border legal practice rights and opportunities for the UK legal sector, given efforts by European Union law firms to use Brexit to win clients from UK competitors?

The draft withdrawal agreement, like the White Paper before it, continues to emphasise regulatory flexibility in the context of services, which would not assist the legal sector. Legal services do not need further regulatory flexibility: the regime in the European Union is already considered to be among the most liberal in the world, and provides lawyers with the freedom to advise and represent their clients anywhere in the EU and in any dispute resolution forum.

The Government have also made mention of adopting the approach of a free trade agreement to services. That is disappointing. Will the Minister explain how a binding
EU-wide regulatory framework for legal services could be agreed in the context of a free trade agreement? Is there a danger that the legal profession in the UK would be left to negotiate different bilateral agreements covering the provision of legal services with many of the EU member states? Will that leave a patchwork of rights and obligations, varying from country to country?

I am also concerned that lawyers from England and Wales might lose their right to advise on European law when in the EU. UK businesses, which will still need to operate under EU law, will be unable to have their trusted UK legal professionals by their side and will instead be forced to hire EU lawyers with whom they are not familiar, and vice versa—despite language and other barriers—to protect and defend their rights within the European Union. Indeed, lawyers from England and Wales will even lose the right to defend the UK Government, as well as UK businesses and UK citizens, before the Court of Justice of the European Union, despite a former president of the Court recognising the UK profession for providing some of the best advocates. That would be a huge loss to both the UK and the European Union.

Will the Minister in her response confirm that the Government will ensure that any future relationship with the European Union includes a mechanism for UK lawyers to practise EU law via the mutual recognition of professional qualifications and law firm structures?

The deal lacks the detail that the professional services sector needs to know in other respects, in particular with regards to temporary mobility for business travel. Do the Minister and the Government appreciate that that is essential for the quick delivery of legal services? For example, a lawyer might need to see a client at short notice in one of the EU members states, or to represent that client in an arbitration or mediation meeting. Will she ensure that, post-Brexit, UK lawyers are able to continue to serve their clients on a fly-in, fly-out basis?

Does the Minister recognise that the UK risks not only the loss of the tax revenue from legal services, but an erosion of the enormous influence and soft power generated by our legal services sector in Europe and internationally?

Finally, I remind the Minister that the UK is the largest market for legal services in Europe, and globally is second only to the US. The Government must do all that they can to protect Britain’s legal services sector after Brexit if the country is to remain the world’s jurisdiction of choice. Equally, it is vital to ensure that international parties understand the ongoing benefits of using English law and legal services once the United Kingdom has left the European Union. An efficient and international market for legal services in Europe, and globally is driven by employing well over 300,000 people. Those jobs are found throughout the UK, although we also have a huge hub of specialist lawyers, many of whom support our vital financial services sector.

English law, as many people have said today, is the most widely used in the world, with 27% of the world’s jurisdictions using it. International firms want to operate in this country, which is why more than 200 foreign law firms have offices in the UK. UK-based firms also operate around the world, and nearly 7,000 practising solicitors from the UK work abroad. My hon. Friend is right to identify that people come here for their legal disputes because of the integrity of our judges, the professionalism of our lawyers and our respect for the rule of law.

My hon. Friend highlighted that the report recognises that “Brexit will be the largest ever change to the UK’s legal framework and it presents both opportunities and risks for the legal sector.” It also recognises that the ability of solicitors, barristers and chartered legal executives to practice as lawyers in the EU is important to lawyers and, as my hon. Friend for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) mentioned, the people whom those lawyers serve.

As far as the transitional period is concerned, market access will remain the same. The draft withdrawal agreement provides that, during the implementation period, EU and UK professionals working in the UK or EU will continue to have their professional qualifications recognised. We set out in the future economic partnership White Paper our proposal for new arrangements for services and investment after we leave the single market. We must recognise that we will no longer be in the single market and that there will be implications for market access.

The outline political declaration made last week identifies: “Ambitious, comprehensive and balanced arrangements on trade in services”.

Those go well beyond World Trade Organisation commitments. The political declaration also identifies the need for provisions on market access and the importance of non-discrimination, and records the need for arrangements on professional qualifications. Alongside
that, the mobility framework will support businesses to provide services—that includes travelling freely without a visa for temporary business activity, for example.

The outline political declaration will be built on and finalised with the aim of producing a full political declaration, which we hope can happen before the end of the month. In a no-deal scenario, there will be no basis for reciprocity—registered European lawyer status, which allows European economic area lawyers to practice permanently in the UK under their home title, will be phased out after exit. New entrants will be able to seek recognition of their qualifications and be admitted to the UK profession in the same way as third-country lawyers. There will be a transitional framework until 31 December 2020 for EEA lawyers and business owners to transfer their qualifications or adapt their business model.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) asked me what preparations my Department was making for no deal. As a competent Government, we are making preparations for no deal. We have issued two technical notices, we are preparing our no-deal statutory instruments and we received £17.3 million in the spring statement, which was allocated to our Department to make suitable arrangements. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst made important points about laws that we can take advantage of in the event of no deal. We will incorporate Rome I and Rome II into our laws and we will sign up to The Hague convention in our own right.

Beyond negotiations with the EU27, we are working with the sector to promote the benefits of market liberalisation. We want to ensure the continued pre-eminence of UK legal services and English law. The Government are committed to championing the legal services sector. We are building our international and domestic relationships and leveraging them to promote the sector overseas. We are working to improve legal services market access. We will seek opportunities in future trade agreements to include ambitious provisions for services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) was right to identify the importance of international arbitration. Companies often choose the UK as the seat of international arbitration, which is an important part of the sector. The Ministry of Justice is working across the board to prepare for the UK’s exit from the EU, as well as continuing to promote legal services on the international stage.

5.23 pm

Mr Djanogly: It is not often that I get the chance to respond to the Minister, because normally so many people want to speak. I am pleased to do so. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for their contributions, and the Minister for her response.

I did not hear a lot of difference in the approach across the piece. We know the issues and what we want to get to. Interestingly, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst spoke about a Committee report from two years ago that dealt with the same issues. Two years later, we have come to the same conclusions in this report—it is not even as though this is a new finding. We all want mutual market access, we want the importance of a labour mobility framework and we see the need for legal certainty.

Several hon. Members said that if those things are not achieved and, as a result, English law clauses are included to a lesser degree in contracts, there is potential for very lasting damage to our legal services. That must be of great concern to everyone in this Chamber. Various treaties were mentioned—Lugano and so forth—but relying on those would be second best. We want the best for our legal services sector. I hope the message has been received and that, as we go into further negotiations, the Minister will bang the drum for legal services as I am sure she will.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the provision of legal services after the UK leaves the EU.

5.26 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Before we begin this important debate, it might help Members to know that the Prime Minister will make a statement in the House at 3 o’clock. If Members wish to speak in this debate they must return for the wind-ups, which will start at approximately 4 o’clock. Nine Back Benchers have indicated that they wish to speak. I do not intend to impose a time limit.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Bone. I am sorry to interrupt proceedings before they have really started. Thank you for your guidance, although I am not one of the Members who will speak; I am unable to because of other engagements. Could the debate be relayed to another room, so that the many people who cannot get into the Strangers Gallery can listen to it? They have come here for that, and are currently excluded. It would be kind to let them hear it.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Thank you for that important point of order. I entirely understand the frustration. I do not schedule debates. The debate could have been scheduled in the House where there would have been enough room for everyone. However, rather than postponing or stopping it, I think we should continue. It may help people to know that when debates happen in Westminster Hall a similar one often happens in the House at a later date. We should crack on with today’s important debate.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): 1.30 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered state pension equalisation for women born in the 1950s.

I stand today feeling the weight of despair, the burning sense of injustice and the genuine bewilderment felt by the women who, by sheer bad luck, were born in the 1950s and thereby inexplicably became fair game to be robbed, mugged and made the victims of theft of the most cruel and callous kind. For some women, that theft can be of up to £40,000 in lost pension. A large number of MPs—too many to mention—who support the Women Against State Pension Inequality, in their quest for justice sent messages asking me to convey their support despite their absence. Many colleagues across the House dearly wanted to speak in the debate but were unable to attend.

In my lifetime, this could be the most unjust Government policy since the poll tax. It affects 3.8 million women, and 4,800 women in my constituency. The acceleration of the timetable set out in the Pensions Act 1995 has meant that these women have faced changes to the pension age abruptly, with little or no time to adapt and prepare. These women have had their pensions stolen from them—it is as simple as that. They paid into their pensions through a lifetime of work, raising their families, and often acting as carers for other members of their families. They did all the right things, only to be told, when it came time for them to be paid, that the rules of the game had changed. Not only that, but no one had thought to tell them that the rules of the game had changed—and that was just bad luck.

In addition, lower wages and broken employment periods mean that many of these women do not have a full national insurance record, so they receive lower state pensions than men anyway. Indeed, the average woman receives about 82% of what a man receives in his state pension. They also have a fraction of the savings of men. Equalisation is not just about the age at which people reach retirement.

With no time to make alternative plans, many women are suffering, and many are now living in poverty as a direct result of the political choice not to give them their due. Only last week, Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, concluded that after decades of decline we are now witnessing a rise in pensioner poverty, with the figure rising in recent years by 300,000. He went on to say that “a group of women born in the 1950s have been particularly impacted by an abrupt and poorly phased in change in the state pension age from 60 to 66.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will just finish the quotation from the rapporteur. He continued: “The impact of the changes to pensionable age is such as to severely penalize those who happen to be on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of entering the next phase of their lives, rather than being plunged back into a workforce for which many of them were ill-prepared and to which they could not reasonably have been expected to adjust with no notice.”

I would be keen to hear the Minister’s response to the rapporteur’s words. If he wishes to intervene to rebut them, I would be delighted to give way, but in the absence of his seeking to intervene, I will take an intervention from the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The next best thing!

Mr Cunningham: I do not know about that. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this timely debate. We have had many such debates, but the Government do not seem to get the message. From the start of the recession until now, women have carried the burden of the recession. In tax adjustments, the Government saved something like £14 billion at the expense of women. The amount the Government are saving through not doing the right thing by these women probably runs into billions. A fraction of those billions could take care of the problem.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well. It was recently said to me that it was interesting that the Government have chosen to pick a fight with
women of a certain age, with a policy that will most harshly affect women in a lower income bracket. They will feel the most pain as a result of the policy, and were perhaps considered an easy target. Perhaps the Minister has views on that.

I have participated in every debate on the WASPI women since I was elected, and I repeatedly heard from whoever is responding for the Government—a variety of Ministers have done so—that the policy is about life expectancy, although we know that that has stalled; it is all about living longer. However, the debate is not about life expectancy, although we know that that has stalled; it is about women who had their pension age changed with little or no notice, directly causing considerable hardship.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My hon. Friend has been a consistent campaigner on this issue; there have been so many debates, and it is heartening to see her pressing it so often. She is absolutely right to press the point about life expectancy. Whenever we have had a debate on state pension inequality, the Pensions Minister has been unable to tell me what the life expectancy in my constituency is. Newspapers such as The Guardian like to talk about the life expectancy in Glasgow East, so I am surprised that the Minister does not know that it is not that high. The changes really affect people in my constituency.

Patricia Gibson: I suspect that the Minister knows fine well the life expectancy in Glasgow East and various parts of the UK, but it might make uncomfortable reading when trying to impose a one-size-fits-all policy and stealing people’s pensions. Many of the women in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and indeed in my own, will die before they are of age to collect.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out that more than one in five women—21.2%—in the group affected by the recent increases in the state pension age were in poverty, which is up 6.4% on the situation pre-reform. Meanwhile, analysis by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies found that the poorest pensioners are the least able to work into their later years. It concluded that both men and women who had been poor during their working lives were the most likely to leave the job market between the ages of 50 and 55, with poor health being the key driver.

With striking inequalities in life expectancy and health expectancy, there are great worries that the policy hits hardest the poorest and most vulnerable. That has been borne out by analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that shows that a third of single women aged between 60 and 63 were in poverty after housing costs—up 13.5% since before the reforms. Similarly, nearly four out of 10 people who rent their homes are in poverty—up from around a quarter. The IFS also found that 1.1 million women had seen their individual incomes fall by an average of £50 a week. Increased income from earnings is simply not enough to offset the loss of pensions. TUC analysis shows that half a million workers who are within five years of state pension age have had to leave the workplace for medical reasons, and that those who have worked in the lowest-paid jobs are twice as likely as managers and professionals to stop working before retirement age, owing to sickness and disability.

In the absence of labour market reforms, it is hard to see how raising the state pension age will allow this group to continue working. Rather, it will mean greater reliance on working-age benefits, which the Government say they wish to avoid. That makes it even more indefensible—this point is key and I hope the Minister is listening, because I would really like him to address it in his reply—that the Government decided to implement the Cridland review’s recommendation to accelerate the rise in pension age to 68, but chose to ignore the welfare reforms that John Cridland said would be essential to cushion the impact of those changes. Will the Minister tell us why? The Government cannot just pick the bits they like; they should implement the whole review or none of it.

The Government have not listened, but that does not mean that these women are not suffering. Many of them have been left destitute. The Government may think that because they are ordinary women—organised, persistent and dignified as they are—they are easier to ignore than rich and powerful men, but the reality does not bear that out. These women have been robbed, betrayed, misrepresented and mistreated, and they will not go away. I repeat a question that I have asked the Government many times: where on earth do they expect these women to go?

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The 10,000 or so WASPI women in my constituency are certainly not natural protesters who wave a placard at the first opportunity. In fact, they have played a very positive role in our communities throughout the years. They are to be found in the women’s institute, making jam, and in many other voluntary groups. It is deeply disappointing that any Government should treat them in such a disrespectful way. Considering that the Chancellor announced more money in the recent Budget, it would have been nice if that Budget had given the WASPI women some recognition.

Patricia Gibson: I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman says. One of the most frustrating things that WASPI women have found in their quest for justice is not that they are not getting what they are asking for—bad as that is—but the wall of silence with which they have been met. It is as though they do not exist. That is not acceptable.

Sir Peter Bottomley: There have been too many occasions on which Pensions Ministers have said how many years women will get a pension for—once they get it. Can we make it plain that the question is what happens in the years before they get the state pension?

Patricia Gibson: The Scottish National party commissioned independent research into how this could be resolved, but the Government rejected it. As far as I can see, they have rejected every other potential solution proposed from every quarter. I would like the Minister to tell us how he thinks the matter can be progressed, because doing nothing is not a sustainable option—certainly not for the WASPI women.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will make some progress.
The WASPI women’s situation is doubly unjust because they are a group who have faced pay discrimination throughout their working lives. They have been paid less, acknowledged less and valued less. Now, when they should be enjoying retirement, they are expected to sit quietly and simply accept the loss of their well-deserved and much-needed state pension. This is not pin money; it is money to pay the rent, buy food, do the shopping and pay the bills. How is that decent, by any measure? It is an absolute disgrace.

The Minister really must have a brass neck if he thinks he can talk his way out of this. The UK Government’s lack of engagement on the issue has been breathtaking in its arrogance. These women know that many of the hardest hit among their number have been driven to self-harm and suicide. Of 873 respondents to research undertaken for the BackTo60 campaign group by the charity SOS Silence of Suicide, almost half had self-harmed because of the stress and hardship caused by this pension reform, while 46% reported having suicidal thoughts as a direct result, and 70 women had attempted to take their own lives. All the while, the UK Government wring their hands and stutter about people living longer.

Such is the Government’s intransigence that these women have been forced to go to court. BackTo60 has launched a judicial review to force the Government to reverse their decision. The argument will be made by Michael Mansfield QC that the pension policy implemented by successive Governments is a gross injustice and is discriminatory, even though the delay in paying out the pensions is in the name of equality—there’s a wee irony for you. Law professor Jackie Jones has argued that the UK is in breach of its international treaty obligations. The demand for what is right—fair transitional arrangements for these women—will not be silenced.

Inconveniently for the Government, the former Pensions Minister, Steven Webb, has conceded that not enough was done to inform and prepare these women for the changes. The Select Committee on Work and Pensions concluded that “more could and should have been done” to communicate the changes. It seems that a mess was made of the acceleration of the changes in the Pensions Act 2011, but the only people to pay the price for that mess are the women involved.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Many women, including constituents of mine at the Blackfriars pub in Glasgow, are watching this debate and listening to my hon. Friend’s excellent speech. Does she agree that the mythical letters that the Department for Work and Pensions was supposed to send to so many women have been the victims of a great injustice. As I said earlier in my speech, it is no less of an injustice than the poll tax. We will continue to stand beside them. The issue has not been debated in the Commons for more than nine months, and I am sure the Government thought the storm had passed. It has not passed. It will not pass. These women are engulfed by the storm every single day they have to manage without their pensions. Up and down the country, in all parts of the UK, WASPI women are watching the debate, inside and outside the Chamber—including Cunninghame WASPI, to whom I pay tribute. All the WASPI women are waiting for justice, hoping against hope that this heartless Government will finally hear their pleas for what is rightfully theirs to be restored to them.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I am sorry; I am just about to wrap up.

In the name of all that is just and all that is right, I urge the Minister to go back from the debate today and tell his Government that this must not stand. The WASPI women need and deserve their pensions. Let us get this sorted. Let us undo the damage once and for all, and let us do it now.

1.51 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I do not wish to make lengthy remarks. This is a very important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member
for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing it. Brentwood and Ongar is the most beautiful constituency in the world, but North Ayrshire and Arran has a chance of being called the second best.

This issue has affected a number of women in my constituency since I was elected last year. I very much understand what they have been through, but I would like to set out my thinking on the subject in the context of how we have arrived where we have.

In 1995, the then Government decided to equalise the state pension age for men and women to address long-standing inequality. That change was part of a wider social trend towards gender equality, but was also a decision that arose partly from European law and equality law cases relating to occupational pension provision.

The last Labour Government, between 1997 and 2010, continued the policy and additionally determined that a state pension age of 65 could not be sustained for very much longer. That was the thinking that led to the Pensions Act 2007, which raised the state pension age to 65, 66 and then 68.

Under the stewardship of the former Member for Thornbury and Yate, an excellent Pensions Minister, the coalition Government introduced additional reforms in the Pensions Act 2011, which brought in a number of highly important reforms—not least auto-enrolment, which has benefited many people across all of our constituencies—and sought to address a growing imbalance.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who was then Secretary of State, said at the time:

“Back in 1926, when the state pension age was first set, there were nine people of working age for every pensioner. The ratio is now 3:1 and is set to fall closer to 2:1 by the latter half of the 21st century. Some of these changes can be put down to the retirement of the baby boomers, but it is also driven by consistent social trend towards gender equality, but was also a decision that arose partly from European law and equality law cases relating to occupational pension provision.

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Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): My predecessor as MP for Ipswich is reported to have characterised the demands of the WASPI women as “intergenerational theft”. Will the hon. Gentleman dissociate himself from that comment?

Alex Burghart: I feel that the hon. Gentleman has achieved his purpose by putting such a claim on record. I am not aware of his predecessor having made such remarks and I am not aware of the context, so he will forgive me if I do not comment on them, although I am sure that he did not really make that intervention to get my response.

Chris Elmore: Although a potted history of where the state pension has come from and why changes have been introduced under whichever Government is interesting, the debate is not about that; it is about the fact that the Government have taken an archaic view and are essentially punishing women born in the 1950s, who have already faced discrimination through maternity laws, previous pension changes and national insurance changes. The debate is not about a potted history of why we are where we are. It is about some sort of redress for those women, who have already faced unnecessary burdens throughout their working lives. I am not trying to suggest that the hon. Gentleman is trying to move the agenda on, but the debate is not about why we have the pensions that we do. It is about the fact that the Government are accelerating the change and not giving any redress to the women affected, who quite frankly deserve it.

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his lengthy intervention. I am making my own speech and will make my points in the way that I wish to make them, although I am grateful to him for telling me how I should speak.

The major demographic change needed to be addressed. A girl born in 1951 was expected to live to 81, and a boy to 77. By this year, the Office for National Statistics cohort figures showed an increase of more than 10 years for newborn girls and more than 12 years for boys, to 92 and 89 respectively.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who secured the debate, has indicated that it is not about life expectancy. With due respect, can I mention an issue raised with me by my county council, which is healthy active life expectancy? In many of the constituencies that Opposition Members represent, healthy active life expectancy is considerably shorter than elsewhere. It is 10 years shorter in County Durham than in parts of the south and south-east. Surely we should be relieving the burden on women who are subject to such discrimination and injustice.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman makes a genuinely interesting point about healthy life expectancy, the figures on which should feature more largely in the debate than they often do. I acknowledge that point.

When Lloyd George first brought in the state pension in the Old Age Pensions Act 1908, it was at 70, when life expectancy was considerably lower.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I have no reason to doubt the hon. Gentleman’s statistics, but is it not just as interesting that the country is now three times as rich as it was when these ladies were born in the 1950s? When there have been other mistakes or crises in the economy, the Government have found money to bail out the bankers. If one compares the equity of this case to that, does the hon. Gentleman not think the Government should change their mind?

Alex Burghart: Presenting the case in the way that the hon. Gentleman does is slightly misrepresentative, because the cost of not bailing out the banks would have been extraordinarily high and would have seen businesses all over the country go bankrupt and people go out of work. It would have damaged their lives and would have become a cost to the state. I simply cannot see things in the binary way that he sets them out.

In 1942, William Beveridge wrote about the purpose of his pensions proposals, saying that “giving to each individual an incentive to continue at work so long as he can, in place of retiring, is a necessary attempt to lighten the burden that will otherwise fall on the British community, through the large and growing proportion of people at the higher ages”.

Under the last Labour Government, it was acknowledged that we must not reach a position where women would be expected to spend 40% of their adult lives in
Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman gives way, let me say that I am grateful to him for making brief remarks, which have gone on for more than 12 minutes.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has given his analysis of the equalisation, but does he find it ironic that the women who were told that they had to work for an additional 18 months were given only five years to sort out that problem, but the men who were asked to work an additional 12 months were given seven years to plan for that change?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Having spoken to women in my constituency, I understand the stress and difficulty that this change has caused. However, it is clear that any attempt to reverse the policy would be extraordinarily expensive.

Dr Drew: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Burghart: I look to you, Chair, to know whether I am entitled to take any more interventions.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): The hon. Gentleman is entitled to go on for as long as he wants, but I would prefer him not to.

Alex Burghart: That makes two of us, Mr Bone. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran did not talk much about the cost of reversing Government policy, which is a shame. I understand that the SNP has costed the reversal of the Pensions Act 2011 at £8 billion, but other experts see that as a vast underestimate. It would actually cost the taxpayer £30 billion or more. There is no doubt that the Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Government the powers that they need to address the issue.

Patricia Gibson: I am really disappointed that we have a speech from somebody who clearly has not read the Scotland Act 2016 and has just lifted the headline from the Daily Mail or whatever it is that he reads. There is no power in that Act to mitigate yet more Tory cuts. We already mitigate Tory cuts to the tune of tens of millions of pounds. Even if we wanted to, under section 28 of the Act—the hon. Gentleman can look it up—we do not have the power. Once again, I urge him to stick to the focus of this debate. He says that I did not talk about money, but I talked about what it has saved the Treasury. Let us spend that money on these women.

Alex Burghart: The focus of the debate is compensation for the women involved. It is a fact that the Scottish Government could do more than they are doing.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): I want this issue to be addressed at UK level—that is absolutely right—but devolution across the UK means that different choices can be taken by those who are in power. It is not just section 28 that gives the Scottish Government the powers to act. Section 26 allows them to make short-term payments to people who need them to avoid a risk to the well-being of an individual.” I genuinely believe that the Scottish Government should act where they can, and they should not play politics with this issue.

Alex Burghart: I am sure we all agree that that was a very interesting intervention. Once again, the SNP wants all the power and none of the responsibility. The Labour...
party has made multiple suggestions about how it would address the situation, and many Opposition Members seek the full compensation package of £70 billion. They proposed in their manifesto to keep the state pension age at 66, which reversed the Labour decision of 2007. It would cost at least £250 billion more than the Government’s preferred timetable, and that is not covered by the party’s 2017 manifesto.

In addition, I understand that there are particular legal difficulties in reintroducing a different retirement age for men and women. Unquestionably, any amendment to the current legislation that introduced a new inequality would be challenged. This is an unsatisfactory situation. I admire the very good campaign that the WASPI campaigners have put together. Having met them, I know that they are principled people who wish to see policy change for entirely understandable reasons. However, I see the cost of change as absolutely prohibitive, and I see no solution from either Opposition party.

2.8 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this very important debate. It is important for all parliamentarians who believe in equality to continue the fight to put right a wrong for women who were born in the 1950s. It is clear that the Government have given up on them.

Last month, we learned from the former Pensions Minister that, as Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) refused to engage with women born in the 1950s who were adversely affected. She was instructed not to speak to them and was told that they would go away sooner or later. When will the Government get the message that the WASPI women are not going anywhere? People seeking to put right a great injustice do not just go away. Good for them!

Last week’s report by the UN expert on extreme poverty showed that the number of pensioners living in poverty in the UK had risen by 300,000 to 16% in the four years to 2016-17, despite measures such as the triple-lock guarantee. The rapporteur said:

“The impact of the changes to pensionable age is such as to severely penalise those who happen to be on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of entering the next phase of their lives, rather than being plunged back into a workforce for which many of them were ill-prepared and to which they could not reasonably have been expected to adjust with no notice.”

He said that the uptick in pensioner poverty was driven by single pensioners, who are significantly more likely to be women. The Government’s response to that damning evidence has been to ignore the findings and shoot the messenger.

Dr Drew: Does my hon. Friend agree that the least the Government could do is to make an actuarial assessment of what the true cost would be of paying compensation to people who have clearly lost out heavily?

Mohammad Yasin: I thank my hon. Friend for that very important point. I agree 100%.

The Government are completely ignoring that evidence. The new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said that that excellent report on extreme poverty is “highly inappropriate”, but she missed the point. What is highly inappropriate is the Government’s arrogant and dogmatic policy on pension inequality. I have received heartbreaking letters from women who have worked hard and paid their dues all their lives, and have now found themselves struggling and humiliated. There are those who are faring better, but only because they can rely on spouses to help them out. Why should they have to do that? Women who do not have their option, perhaps because their spouse is dead, have found themselves destitute at a vulnerable time in their lives. The Government’s appalling response is to tell those women, who have worked for nearly 40 years, to get on their bike and try to find a job. That is highly inappropriate.

If the Government were even remotely in touch with real life, they would know that that is not an option for most of those women. Many are unable to work or have caring responsibilities for elderly parents, spouses and grandchildren. Instead of dismissing the women born in the 1950s, who are fighting for their rights, and dismissing the UN special rapporteur’s report, the Government should make the welfare system more humane. If they do not, they will be dismissed at the next general election.

2.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate. She has been a stalwart in speaking out for the WASPI women. I was very happy to be a co-signatory to her request to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate, and I am happy to add my support.

I know that I speak for so many others when I say that my constituents in Strangford were gutted to find that no change has been made to the nefarious decision to deny women their hard-earned pension. An email I received said that there was a sense of “despair amongst our WASPI women with increasingly negative effects on mental and physical health and catastrophic financial situations.”

I cannot underline enough those women’s mental and physical health and their catastrophic financial situations. The people I have spoken to are greatly affected by those three things.

It is little wonder that those women feel like that when it appears that the political route has led nowhere. The Bill supported by the all-party group on state pension inequality for women has been kicked into the long grass. For that reason, the WASPI women have, alongside their political campaign, been progressing on the legal front. They believe that proving that the DWP failed in its duty and committed maladministration is the most cost-effective and quickest way for the 3.8 million women affected by the changes to the state pension age in the Pensions Acts of 1995, 2007 and 2011 to achieve justice and recompense.

I am aware that the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has begun his preliminary inquiry. He is starting with the 1995 Act and is looking at whether the DWP failed in its duty to inform women of the significant change to state pension age, which had been 60 for
women since 1948. If he finds that the DWP failed in its duty and committed maladministration, he should make recommendations about what the Government should do to make amends. That would be an important way of addressing these issues. Those recommendations should perhaps include recompense for the losses suffered by all women adversely affected by the changes.

It is time that we did the right thing for those women. In my constituency alone, 5,800 women have been adversely affected. I am not saying that every one of them has come and spoken to me, but a great proportion have. They worked their fingers raw and had their end goal in sight, but the certainty of a pension was removed from them with very little notice. They did not have the ability to change the course of their financial future. They were told the facts of the case and were left to deal with it. The women who have spoken to me include not only civil servants who planned their financial future and are now cast into uncertainty, in doubt about how their well-deserved retirement will pan out, but women who have literally scrubbed on their hands and knees. They are saying, “Jim, I don’t know how I can physically do this anymore.”

Sandy Martin: The point is not just that those people worked hard all their lives and then suddenly found that their pension age had been increased, but that they were not given the time to plan their lives in advance. In many cases, they finished work and found that they would not get their pension for years afterwards.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. They thought they had planned for their pension age, but suddenly found that it was grasped away from them at the last moment. The impact on women throughout Northern Ireland is incredible. I have said this before, and I will keep on saying it: we need to do the right thing. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said that we must do the right thing. I am here to do the right thing and make sure it happens.

This equalisation was initially brought about in 1995, when an EU directive prompted the Government to equalise retirement age for men and women—then 65 and 60 respectively. The Government chose to level it at 65, and it was decided to increase women’s SPA in stages between 2010 and 2020. Women born in 1950-51 would retire at 61, those born in 1952-53 would retire at 62 and so on until 65 was reached for all post-1955 women in 2020.

I am unsure how we got to the stage at which we are asking women to work into their 70s and beyond. People are working longer, but they will not live longer if we make them work longer. I believe that enough is enough. I am not alone in that view. I read an article—the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran referred to it—that said:

“A United Nations independent expert has affirmed the stance taken by campaign groups including the Women Against State Pension Inequality...that certain women have been affected disproportionately by recent pension age changes.”

We cannot ignore the United Nations—we often refer to it.

“Philip Alston’s report Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom on extreme poverty and human rights, out on Friday (16 November), showed the number of pensioners living in poverty in the UK had risen by 300,000 to 16 per cent in the four years to 2016/17. This was despite measures such as the triple lock guarantee. But he found a group of women born in the 1950s had been particularly impacted a ‘poorly phased in’ change in the state pension age.”

Mr Alston said: ‘As was made clear to me in a number of submissions and through powerful personal testimony, a group of women born in the 1950s have been particularly impacted by an abrupt and poorly phased in change in the state pension age from 60 to 66.

‘The impact of the changes to pensionable age is such as to severely penalise those who happen to be on the cusp of retirement and who had well-founded expectations of entering the next phase of their lives’—as the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) said—“rather than being plunged back into a workforce for which many of them were ill-prepared and to which they could not reasonably have been expected to adjust with no notice.”

Ross Thomson: I want to share the experience of Ann from my constituency, whom I met on Friday. Three months prior to her 60th birthday, she had to leave work due to a health issue. She lived alone and had no income, and therefore had nothing to resort to bar her life savings. She is now living on a very small work pension, but had to add to that significantly from her savings. Over the years, she had done exactly what the hon. Gentleman spoke about. She had planned how to spend her savings, but she now has to use them for ordinary living expenses instead. There is an inherent unfairness in that.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He has told us the experience of his constituent, as I have done—many of mine tell me the same thing. They are saying, “Jim, I don’t know how I can physically do this anymore.”

I understand that others want to speak and I want to try and keep to the timescale that you indicated, Mr Bone, so I will conclude. It is clear that others can see what the Government cannot. We must address the issue, and address it now. I hope the Minister will outline how he intends to address it rather than—with respect—wash his hands of it. It is time for action, not for words. Enough is enough.

2.21 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I promise that my brief remarks will last less than 17 minutes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate and on making such a powerful speech. She covered the issue, but what she said about the number of people who are suicidal, attempt suicide, or self-harm, was particularly pertinent and should make the Government sit up. That sums up the injustice of the issue; the Government should really listen.

Once again, I am here to speak on behalf of the 6,500 women in my constituency who have been affected by the various Pensions Act changes. First of all, I want to look at some of the politics surrounding the pension changes and the subsequent developments. We all know that the women affected by the Pensions Act 1995 were...
not properly notified. That is completely undeniable and even loyal Tories have acknowledged in previous debates that there were “communication issues”, which is certainly an understatement. Many Tories have stated their genuine concern and have signed up as backers of the WASPI campaign, yet all these years and months later, there has been no change despite the fact that we now have a minority Government. How hard can those sympathetic Tories really be working their Government on the issue? The Democratic Unionist party were able to extract concessions to prop the Government up, but that is proving very challenging for Conservative Members.

As the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) demonstrated in his speech, too many Tories blindly back the mantra that there was a £1.1 billion concession during the Bill stages of the Pensions Act 2011. Not robbing women of an extra £1.1 billion is not the same as putting money into the system. It was just a bit less of a shafting for some of those affected, and I could not believe that the hon. Gentleman repeated that myth. We then hear the bigger picture: the Tories blame all the cuts that they imposed on the financial crash and the previous Labour Government. I might agree that Gordon Brown squandered billions of pounds, but while the Tories impose spending cuts, they have no problem introducing tax cuts for the wealthiest.

A Library briefing with projections of Budget measures from 2017 and 2018 estimates that the tax giveaways such as corporation tax, inheritance tax and higher income tax thresholds will cost the Treasury £78.6 billion pounds between 2017 and 2025. It is clear that austerity is for some but not for others. The fact that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar said that compensation is completely unaffordable just shows that those choices have been made by Members in the Division Lobbies.

The Liberal Democrats now fully back WASPI, but the Minister for Pensions in 2011, Steve Webb, was one of theirs. They are the ones who started the austerity process in coalition with the Tories. Back then, Steve Webb estimated that if the timetable was not altered, pension spending would be £26 billion higher over a decade. Why was that figure so important in the grand scheme of Government spending when, as I have pointed out, tax cuts have suddenly become affordable?

Labour—Scottish Labour, in particular—is peddling, along with the Tories, the myth that the Scottish Parliament should be able to rectify matters for affected Scottish women. That comes after it said that pensions would be protected by Scotland remaining part of the UK in 2014, and after it fought tooth and nail against the concept of pensions being devolved to Scotland. Labour made sure pensions were not a Smith commission recommendation. The Scotland Act was designed specifically to make pensions a reserved matter and ensure that the Scottish Government could not introduce an age-based benefit! Why has Labour bought into the Tory sleight of hand which says that we can make changes in the Scottish Parliament while our budget is cut by £2 billion over a 10-year period? It was also a Labour Government that devolved pensions to Northern Ireland, while steadfastly refusing to do so for Scotland, which is another mystery that I cannot get my head around. Those parties all have culpability either for the current situation, or for masking responsibility for it.

Meanwhile, our constituents still suffer. I have been contacted by a constituent who has been fighting for 18 years to get her dead husband’s Metropolitan police pension. Recently, when she had primary care duties for her mother, she had to fight local authorities in England to get her mum into a care home. She has also been hit by the increase in contributions required, and is trying to pay more into the system—another five years’ contributions—so she gets a full pension when she reaches state pension age. She still has four years to go to reach her new state pension age, and without her widow’s pension she is in real financial hardship. She says that she does not want to access benefits because of a fear of the assessment process and of the threats and demands placed on jobseekers. That is the reality of the Government policy about which the UN special rapporteur says UK Government Ministers are in denial.

Finally, I pay tribute to a WASPI constituent of mine, Ann Hammil, who first raised the WASPI issue with me a number of years ago. She has fought her corner with the authorities and her case is now with the parliamentary ombudsman. The other week, she said to me:

“Alan, I will not give in to them.”

I completely support her attitude and that of other WASPI women and campaigners all over the UK. I hope I can help them achieve justice.

2.27 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this extremely important debate. The message from today could not be clearer: this issue is not going to go away. We will not allow it to be kicked into the long grass and the tenacity of the campaigners will certainly not let it be forgotten. It is not a couple of pounds that have been taken away, and this is not a request for a handout. It is about livelihoods being destroyed, homes being lost, dignity being taken away, and the social contract between the state and the citizen being broken.

Events this week have demonstrated clearly that the Government do not command a majority, even on financial matters. Given the support we have heard right across the Chamber, the parliamentary arithmetic would clearly favour a fair and just settlement for the WASPI campaigners. I say to the Minister that time is running out for the Government to bring forward a proposal on their own terms.

I understand that this is not a simple issue to resolve and that there will be financial consequences for the Government, but when we are talking about a profound injustice on this scale, there is an imperative to act. As we have seen with the vast sums of money being expended on a Brexit deal that even members of the Cabinet do not support, or the additional expenditure in Northern Ireland to pay for a confidence and supply agreement that has delivered neither of those things, the Government have shown that they can find the money when there is a political imperative.

I simply do not accept that nothing can be done. There is not just a political imperative, but a moral imperative. In this country, we do not tell people who
are ill that only they should be responsible for funding their treatment. We do not tell parents that they alone should fund the education of their children. When a mistake of this magnitude has been made by a Government, whether it happened yesterday or 23 years ago, the only morally acceptable outcome is for us all to accept responsibility and find a solution. We will hear concerns about the sums involved, but what we are really trying to do is find some justice.

We have all heard harrowing stories from our constituencies of women who have worked all their lives and now, through a change of circumstance, have found themselves in a dire situation, with some having to sell their homes. Some have worked hard and progressed through their careers only to face the indignity of being told to take up an apprenticeship when they are in their early 60s. Women who were in senior positions have been forced to attend DWP courses where they are given advice on how to dress for a job interview or how to write a CV.

I fear that the most serious cases might not even be those we have heard about today, or the ones that end up in our inboxes. It is not only about the ones we hear about; it is about those who are unable to fight for their rights. One of my constituents told me:

“I am struggling daily with trying to work three days a week as I am now disabled. I suffer from anxiety and depression and every day is really hard for me. I cannot impress on you strongly enough how hard life is for me.”

Another said:

“It’s now a heat or eat situation for many. Some women are suicidal and some have had to sell their homes. Can you imagine how it feels for a woman in her 60s who has always worked, but is now frightened and in ill health, to be made to sign on? This isn’t equality; it’s injustice.”

I could not agree more.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the state pension system is founded on a contributory principle; it is not a state benefit in which no prior commitment is involved. Yet that group of women, who have paid and fulfilled their end of the deal, face being short-changed retrospectively.

There is great irony in the fact that if a defined benefit pension fund became insolvent and left people possibly facing such a position in retirement, scheme members would be compensated by the Pension Protection Fund. That scheme is funded by a levy applied to all members of the scheme, so that those who have lost out through no fault of their own are not left destitute as a result.

The principle is simple: women born in the 1950s were simply ignoring the calls of those women. I ask the Government to attend DWP courses where they are given advice on how to dress for a job interview or how to write a CV.

2.34 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Bone, for calling me to speak, and my friend the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this important and timely debate. It is absolutely essential to keep this issue on the agenda, as it affects every single constituency. Though not as many of my constituents are affected by the change as those of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), nevertheless 4,542 women in Easington are, and I owe it to them to keep fighting until the Government give them the justice that they deserve.

I want to mention my late constituent, Val Roberts. I have referred to her before. She was a determined campaigner in the interests of WASPI women. As I mentioned in a previous debate, she was left with no alternative but to sell her home and move into private rented accommodation. Sadly, Valerie has passed away, and that has redoubled my determination to see that others receive their due state pension.

We have debated this issue many times in the main Chamber and here in the Westminster Hall Chamber. I pay tribute to the WASPI women for their incredibly active campaign over the years and in particular over the past few months. Early-day motion 63 has been signed by 196 right hon. and hon. Members, including Conservative Members—notably the hon. Member for...
Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley)—and others present such as my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), while numerous others have also pushed the campaign forward. An e-petition laid before Parliament attracted well over 100,000 signatures, and support for the campaign continues to grow.

My recollection of a previous Westminster Hall debate is that it was so oversubscribed—as this one would have been today but for the Brexit statement in the main Chamber—that Members were sitting on the window ledges, as those who were at the debate will recall. This is a live political issue that will not go away.

Dr Drew: Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the reason why the WASPI women are so frustrated is that the Government will not engage with the matter? I do not expect them just to give the money over, but it is time for the Government to have a proper discussion with the representatives of WASPI to see whether there is a way forward. At the moment, there does not appear to be. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the Government’s fault?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I could not have put it better myself. I hope, however, that the Minister will come up with some positive solutions to address this terrible injustice.

We have heard that 3.8 million women are affected, many of whom will be driven into poverty and reliance on food banks. That is a disgrace in one of the wealthiest nations on earth. Although the report by Philip Alston, the United Nations expert, has not been greeted with enormous acclaim by Department for Work and Pensions Ministers, we should look at what he says. He talked to various campaign groups, including the Women Against State Pension Inequality. He says that certain women, including the WASPI group, have been affected disproportionately by recent changes in policy, particularly those in relation to the pension age. Philip Alston’s statement on extreme poverty and human rights in the UK showed that in the four years to 2016-17 the number of pensioners living in poverty had risen by 300,000, or 16%. That is despite assurances from the Government that measures such as the triple lock guarantee would ensure that pensioner poverty was a thing of the past.

I mentioned this in an intervention, but it is an important point, which I hope the Minister will address. This is not just about variations in life expectancy. Ministers keep telling us that people are living longer, so in order to make pensions affordable the state retirement age has to be adjusted. There are huge regional variations not only in life expectancy, but in the amount of time that a retired person can expect to live a healthy and active lifestyle. That, too, should be factored into the Government’s calculations.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Two, three, four or five times the number of WASPI women watching in this room are outside. I pay tribute to them for coming to Westminster, and it is a great shame, as you remarked earlier, Mr Bone, that we could not have had a bigger venue to accommodate them.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I applaud the campaigners; they have pressed their case and put pressure Members of Parliament to come up with solutions. I also salute my hon. Friend, who will be addressing a meeting in his constituency on this issue on Saturday.

Chris Stephens: Surely we should consider not just life expectancy but work life expectancy. I suggest that is different. In many cases, women do physically taxing work; there is a huge difference between what someone can be expected to do in their working life and their life as a whole.

Grahame Morris: That is a relevant point. I hope the Minister and his advisers are noting the contributions being made, because they should be all factored into the calculations.

Women are particularly affected by poverty. Reductions in social care services translate into increased burdens on primary care givers, and that burden falls on women disproportionately. Various reports have indicated that, not least a report last year by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which warned that half a million more people would live in poverty if the Government maintained their existing benefits freeze. The Government have room for manoeuvre and some flexibility. They could have used the windfall to end the benefits freeze a year earlier than planned. Instead, they chose to change income tax thresholds in a way that will help those who are better off and to do nothing to help those in greatest need and in poverty. The poor could easily have been spared from the worst effects of poverty, if the political will had existed.

There are things that the Minister and the Government can do immediately. We are unnecessarily making many women of the 1950s generation rely on food banks; some are being forced to sell their homes and rely on the benefits system. That is degrading for women who have worked all their lives, often in very demanding occupations. If the Minister is looking for suggestions to make an immediate start, he could announce that the winter fuel allowance, which can be worth up to £300, will be paid immediately. If the Government were to give the WASPI women that payment, they would be able to have some level of comfort during the cold winter weather. Many in my region in the north-east will have to choose between heating and eating.

We must recognise the injustice faced by these women, because there have been so many missed opportunities to put their position right. I have no doubt that the Pensions Act 2011 accelerated the changes—many Members mentioned that. The former Pensions Minister Steve Webb, who is quoted extensively, said that he wrote to the WASPI women on behalf of the coalition Government after those changes. He said that he not only informed them about the one-year change in pension age, set out in the 2011 Act, but informed them—many for the first time—about an earlier change that meant that some women’s state pension retirement age was being extended by six years.

I was incredibly disappointed that the Budget did not offer any form of help or relief for the WASPI women. I acknowledge that some Conservative Members made representations to the Chancellor in all sincerity, and I was disappointed that neither he nor the Prime Minister responded sympathetically to them. I understand the
Prime Minister is a WASPI woman; I would be curious to know from the Minister whether she received notification from the Department for Work and Pensions about the changes in her pension.

The Government must understand that this is a time-sensitive issue. We are willing to work cross-party to find a solution. If the Government are unable to do that, they will let down a whole generation of women who are being denied a fair deal on their state pension. In my constituency, 4,500 women are affected. The campaign is looking for justice, not just warm words.

2.45 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for bringing this important debate before us, and you, Mr Bone, for allowing me to speak directly after my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who has worked tirelessly over the years to press this cause. He is a true champion of this subject and a far greater expert on it than me.

There are more than 5,000 WASPI women in Hartlepool. I am proud to say that this Saturday, the inaugural meeting of the first Hartlepool branch will take place. My hon. Friend will be the guest speaker. I pay homage to those women of Hartlepool, two of whom, Barbara Crossman and Lynne Taylor, are here today. The event on Saturday has been organised by Councillor Lesley Hamilton, Unison and local WASPI women activists, and will conclude a week in which we have championed the need for women to be engaged in politics. That irony has not escaped me. As parliamentarians, in the centenary year of women’s enfranchisement, we have campaigned all week for better representation for women in Parliament, celebrating the suffragettes and sporting their colours on both sides of the House. Yet this injustice towards women’s pensions lingers on without resolution.

It is unfortunate that there appears to be a fragmentation of those campaigning on this important issue—there is WASPI, CASPI, which stands for Campaigning Against State Pension Inequality, and the BackTo60 movement—because the main campaign is so important. The Pensions Act 1995 increased the state pension age for women from 60 to 65 in order to equalise it with that for men, with the change to be phased in over 10 years from 2010 for women born between 1950 and 1955. That transition was later sped up by the Pensions Act 2011. Those changes came as a shock to many women who had not been made aware of them. Some women found that they would have to wait up to six years longer for their state pension, which not only affected their retirement plans but pushed some into poverty and forced others to sell their home in order to make ends meet.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech. If women were notified, it was more likely to be by those campaign groups than by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Mike Hill: The hon. Gentleman makes a poignant point.

Many of my constituents in Hartlepool have been affected in the way that I described. As a member of the Petitions Committee, I am well aware that the WASPI petition easily achieved the 100,000 signatures required to generate a debate in Parliament. Subsequently, there have been numerous debates on the subject, with one clear and stark exception—it has not yet been discussed in the main Chamber as part of official Government business. In fact, the Government continue to reject calls for compensation for the unfair ways in which the 1995 and 2011 changes were implemented, which affected the lives of around 2.6 million women.

The Government argue that they had to make the state pension more affordable to taxpayers. It has been estimated that the reforms have delivered £5.1 billion back to the Treasury. A study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that women’s household incomes reduced by an average of £32 a week as a result of the increase in the state pension age from 60 in 2010 to 63 in 2016. The IFS also says that the implementation has had a bigger impact on lower-income households—the knock-on effect was a 6.4% increase in the absolute poverty rate.

How can an estimated 3.5 million women, all upstanding citizens who have paid their dues to the state, be treated like this? They were the subject of legislation aimed at equalising the state pension age, but in the process of that happening, they were not properly notified, and therefore not given the necessary warning to make provision for the changes. They were quite simply caught out, which led to a sharp increase in income poverty among 60 to 62-year-old women. The changes have had devastating consequences for the women affected, including many in my constituency. For the Government to allow this state of affairs to continue is nothing short of a disgrace and a scandal.

2.49 pm

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this debate. I want to make a few brief points. Many of them have been made already, but they are worth making again, especially since we have the Minister here.

I have a very active WASPI group on the Isle of Wight, which is led by Yvonne Yelland and others. I pay tribute to the work she has done with her WASPI team. I hear many of the same concerns about financial loss and hardship. It seems to me, as I said earlier, that these people are not naturally given to protesting or being dissenting voices in our society. For decades they have brought up families, in many cases been part of traditional husband and wife structures, and played their parts in their communities very well. For us to ignore these ladies and their plight, in effect because we think they will not dissent, go out on the streets or cause problems, is fundamentally to disrespect them and their contributions to public life.

I am partly motivated by a sense of fairness. These women went into the workforce in a very different era. They did not have any hope of equal pay, which we have more or less achieved in this day and age. Not only did they work generally for less pay than their menfolk and male counterparts, but they now find the modest pensions they had hoped to gain have been pushed back—more than once. They have faced not only pay inequality but unfairness over pensions.

[Joan Ryan in the Chair]
As I said, the WASPI women in my patch have played a strong and active role in our society. Their quiet poverty concerns me. Many of them, their menfolk having also retired, are effectively dependent on one pension. Yvonne and other people from my WASPI group have talked to me about the effect of that on their quality of life. They have to make iniquitous and wretched choices—they are not able to go away or visit their grandchildren, and they perhaps have to think carefully about how they heat their homes in winter.

I do not think we will get anything like a perfect settlement—these women have already been negatively affected by not being able to get the pension they are entitled to—but I strongly support the report of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. I know the Government have to keep an eye on the purse strings, but I have difficulty understanding why some kind of gender assessment cannot be published. I do not see why we cannot have some kind of open, official forum for the WASPI women or their representatives to come and tell their stories about how the changes have affected them.

For me, this is a question of natural justice. Although we are unlikely, for better or worse, to be able to afford to do everything the WASPI women want—I realise we have to balance the books—I hope very much that, now we are moving on in some way from austerity, the Government can move to some kind of transitional arrangement to recognise some of the hardship. They should do that not only through one-off payments but in a structured way that recognises the injustice and that something can and should be done. I know such vague words occasionally come back to haunt politicians, but something can be done to rectify this situation. We need some kind of transitional agreement that respects the WASPI women’s plight and, while respecting the financial position we are in, recompenses them, because I believe their cause absolutely to be a just one.

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2.54 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I will try to sum up as succinctly as I can. First, let me say that it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely). His was one of the few sincere speeches we heard from Government Members. Since this problem first rose to prominence, I have made every effort to be as factual and politically neutral as possible. I think everyone who has been active in the campaign throughout would agree with me about that. It is great to see the same sensible comment and genuine constructiveness in the Conservative party, because this issue affects every constituency in the UK. It is an honour to follow the hon. Gentleman.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—also known as Patricia—on bringing this issue forward for debate again. I honestly cannot remember how many times we have debated it—this must be the 13th or 14th. I find myself thinking, “What the hang am I supposed to say that’s new? What more evidence can we give?”

While I praised the sincere comments by Government Members, I want to address some of their more insincere comments. First, however, I want to try to frame this issue a little. What underlies the entire issue is the fact that austerity does not work. We have been arguing that for years. If someone is a millionaire, their money sits in the bank—it is not the most productive—whereas if we make a conscious effort to ensure that the average worker has more money in their pocket, they spend it and we find that local economies start booming, people start picking themselves up off the ground and communities thrive. We have witnessed from consecutive Conservative Governments the total destruction of any chance of recovery after the economic crash. That is the underlying thing.

The Government say problems such as WASPI just have to be suffered because they are all in the national economic interest. They also say things such as, “The national debt has fallen.” It has not—it has just been transferred to households. Household debt is getting worse because people are being forced to face all the debts for which the Government have decided, “That’s not my responsibility, end of.” That just cannot be okay.

As well as transferring that debt to households, the Government are trying to transfer political responsibility for this issue to the Scottish Government. When I say this issue is too important to play politics with, that is exactly that kind of guff I am talking about. I notice that the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is not here to hear my response to what he said, but I will indulge other hon. Members with my comments.

Let me make this absolutely clear: section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 states that the Scottish Government cannot assist by reason of old age.” I do not know how that could be clearer. We cannot pick a group of people and say, “We’re going to give you money because of your age.” This Government are trying to peddle the mistruth that we can but are choosing not to. The Scottish National party, along with individuals from other parties, has been at the forefront of doing the Government’s work for them. We provided a report—I hand-delivered it to Downing Street, so I know they have a copy—yet there has been no progress. We have yet to hear anything from the Government other than, “Look, we tried our best. We’re just going to ignore it.” That is not good enough from any Government.

I was amazed that the hon. Gentleman also said that this was typical SNP and that we did not want any of the responsibility. I am sorry, but that is just untrue. The SNP’s stance is for independence. We want all the powers because we want responsibility. We are tired of having Governments we did not vote for dictating to us, creating problems and then turning to us and saying, “You fix it.” The idea that Scottish people should be taxed more to fix it by a Parliament and a party they voted for who are completely against austerity is ridiculous. If anything, I suggest that any tax increases to mitigate the Tories’ policies should be referred to as a Union tax, because that is the price Scotland will pay so long as it is part of this Union and allows the Conservatives to have control over pensions.

Let me make it clear again, in case it has been lost in previous debates: if the Minister wants to give us power over pensions we will gladly accept it. We will accept that responsibility and try to do our utmost, but please stop peddling mistruths and trying to deliberately confuse people.
Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Can I give the hon. Member some advice?

Mhairi Black: Yes.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): You could say that an hon. Member or a Minister is incorrect but you cannot say that it is an untrue. I hope that is helpful.

Mhairi Black: Even if it is untrue?

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I have given you my advice.

Mhairi Black: Okay. Of course, out of respect for this place that is absolutely fine.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I think you know the rules about implying that an hon. Member has told a lie.

Mhairi Black: Forgive me. I am just explaining things as they are in front of me. Of course, I will take that back now.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): Thank you.

Mhairi Black: I will happily accept that the Ministers and several Conservatives might just be very confused and they may have got their facts wrong, which in itself is quite worrying. I would suggest that they do not make statements making demands of other Governments until they have read the Act themselves.

My last point is that this is all about equality—that is the one thing that pretty much everyone in the Chamber can agree on, and we will no doubt hear the Minister say that this is all about equality. Yesterday I took part in a panel at the Fawcett Society. As hon. Members will be aware, we have had 100 years of women in Parliament—we have had many events. Last night, we had a big photograph on the Terrace with all the male and female MPs and it was all great, with everyone celebrating how far women have come, to prove how much we have learned from feminism, to show a true understanding of why the female experience of life has been, what their experience of Government and policy structures have been and what it has done to affect them. The job of Government now is to make sure that our policies help to mould a society that satisfies and respects all its citizens and their needs—“the state of being equal especially in status, rights and opportunities.”

If the Minister truly believes that the Government has delivered on that then I am afraid he has not listened. If he, like me, cannot argue that the Government is furthering these women’s rights or opportunities, that should be his starting point. I can only hope that his conscience takes him there.

3.4 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I sincerely thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this vital debate and for her consistent record in championing the cause. I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of the Opposition, not just because it is an opportunity to thank Members for a good, well considered and passionate debate, but because I have raised this issue from the start of my time here, which has not been long—I arrived in 2017.

I do not wish to reiterate what has already been said, but it is clear that the decision to accelerate the rise in women’s state pension age in 2011 has had a devastating impact on many women who were born in the 1950s. Many are now facing hardship and poverty as a result, as was recently highlighted in the UN report cited by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran and my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris).

Some 3.8 million women affected did not have “fair notification” of the changes. Those are the words not only of those 3.8 million women nationally or the 4,000 women affected in my constituency, but of the former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb. Those women certainly deserve recognition for this injustice, and fair transitional protections.

In one of my earliest interventions in the House I mentioned Catherine Vernon, one of more than 4,000 constituents in Weaver Vale affected by this issue. It is an issue that was created by, and as things stand can only be solved by, the current Conservative Government. They could be influenced by the Democratic Unionist party, of course. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, has been consistent in supporting women and campaigning on this issue. I would hope that he and his colleagues on the DUP Benches will put the same energy that is going into Brexit at the moment into supporting this campaign.

This injustice has been highlighted many times before, and in my short time here the issue has been mentioned more than 100 times in Parliament. We have had debates, lobby protests, a petition signed by well over 100,000 people and early-day motion 63, with 196 signatures from across the parties. I recently had the honour of joining many campaigners outside Parliament, and I met up with an old family friend from Castleford, West Yorkshire, named Sheila, who was there with some very vocal campaigners. “I’m sorry, Mike,” she said. “I’m
just going to have to go away now—unfortunately I can’t spend any longer with you. I’ve just got to go and block the road with many other people.” I must confess that I did not join her because as an MP I felt that was not my place.

Many MPs have taken the cause forward with passion and conviction, none more so than my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. Perhaps most memorably, during the Budget statement a few weeks ago we saw a number of women affected making their case in what can only be described as a very direct and loud manner. I was certainly proud to applaud them.

I and many other hon. Members have been inspired by the commitment and tenacity of the campaigners, and I would like to pay tribute to every single one of them in the Chamber now, those who could not get in and everyone watching. However, as today’s debate has made clear, we are no closer to securing justice for these women. This Government are no closer to accepting their culpability and doing something about it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East has said before:

“These women feel cheated and disrespected, and they are angry. Every meeting”— including this one—“is packed. Not one of these women has any intention of giving up until they get the result that they have earned and that they deserve.”—[Official Report, 14 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 648.]

If the Government think that these campaigners will simply disappear or give up, they could not be more wrong.

As hon. Members have said, the problems are real and UK-wide, and they need action now. We have had contributions today from the hon. Members for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), for Strangford, for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), from my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Easington, for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and from the Scottish National party spokesperson. Apart from one, they have all been pretty consistent in their opposition to the Government’s proposals.

I will cite examples: the hon. Member for Isle of Wight quite eloquently called on the Chancellor, in the forthcoming spending review, to help what I think in his case were 10,000 constituents affected to move toward justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston highlighted a challenging case of a constituent struggling to pay her bills while holding down a part-time job, and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West highlighted a case of a constituent struggling to look after her husband, who is in his 70s now, and juggling a part-time job when she should be enjoying retirement. Those are the injustices that people face on a daily basis.

As I mentioned, if we are to respond properly to these stories and gain justice for those affected, the Government must listen and they must act. My question to the Minister is, will they do so? Will they commit to extending pension credits to hundreds of thousands of women born in the ’50s? Will they respond to the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Easington asked about extending the winter fuel allowance to the people affected? Beyond that, will they commit to developing a proper and full package of transitional proposals to support these women and address the injustice they have experienced?

It is positive that Andy Burnham, a former Member of this House and now a metro Mayor, has offered a solution on transport, with free bus passes for those affected in Greater Manchester, but let us be clear about this: it should not be up to our local politicians to take action when it is the Government’s responsibility to do so. As important as it is for local politicians to come up with such schemes, it in no way compensates for, or reflects the true scale of, the injustice that millions of women have suffered.

The Minister must take responsibility and take action, because the problems go beyond individual hardship; this injustice is furthering wider problems in our society too. It has been pointed out by parliamentary colleagues elsewhere that the gender pay gap for the over-60s has increased by nearly 3% in a year, partly as a result of so many women having to take low-paid jobs just to make ends meet. It is a self-defeating policy, and it needs to be addressed now.

Sadly, the Government’s commitment to dealing with people who have been affected, even under the existing regulations, appears to be lacking. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) has previously noted that there are just three case examiners working on almost 3,000 WASPI cases. The average wait for a complaint is 36 weeks, with many taking more than 43 weeks. Will the Minister show some commitment to dealing with such complaints by ensuring that there are enough staff to handle them, so that women are not yet again left in limbo and feeling ignored by this Government?

Yesterday we recognised 100 years since the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918, which allowed women to stand and vote in Parliament, a key milestone in a long campaign for women’s equality and suffrage. At the heart of that campaign for equality was a rallying cry to action, “Deeds not Words”.

One hundred years on, our 1950s women need deeds, not words, and it is up to the Minister and the Government to deliver them.

3.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and thank all individual hon. Members for their forthright and impassioned contributions.

The background is well known. The change, announced in 1993, was made for a number of different reasons, notably equality legislation and various cases in the European courts. At the same time, life expectancy and pressures on state spending were being considered. The reality of the present situation is that the number of people receiving a state pension is expected to grow by one third over the next 25 years, and by 2034 there will be more than twice as many people over 100 as there are now. The old age dependency ratio is projected to rise significantly over the next 20-odd years.
Following the passing of the Pensions Act 1995, the actual and projected growth in the pensioner population continued faster than anticipated, due to increasing longevity. As a result, the then Labour Government decided that a state pension age fixed at 65 was not affordable or sustainable. The Pensions Act 2007 was introduced, increasing state pension ages to 66, 67, and 68 years. The coalition Government, as has been explained today, set out further changes in the Pensions Act 2011, which accelerated the equalisation of women's state pension age and brought forward the increase in men and women's state pension age to 66, so that it would be completed by 2020. The Pensions Act 2014 then brought forward the increase in state pension age to 67 by eight years, so that it would be completed by 2028, and introduced regular reviews of the state pension age, the first of which was the Cridland review of 2017, to ensure that the system remains fair, sustainable and affordable for taxpayers on an ongoing basis.

There has been much discussion about life expectancy, which I will touch on briefly at this stage. The reality is that since the second world war there have been dramatic transformations in NHS care, in the quality of healthcare generally and in the nature of healthy lifestyles. Cohort life expectancy projections have also been transformed in that time, rising by more than 10 years for individual men and women. By 2018 those figures had increased by more than 10 years for newly born girls and by more than 12 years for boys, to 92 and 89 respectively. It remains the case that women live significantly longer than men.

Graeme Morris: I wonder whether the Minister might address the issue I raised about not just life expectancy, but the anticipation of a healthy and active lifespan after retirement. Many of my constituents have worked in quite demanding occupations and are physically not capable of further work, which the Minister has previously suggested they should take advantage of. They really need to access their state pension.

Guy Opperman: I was going to come to that, but I will turn to that point now. I will deal first with general life expectancy and then with the point on healthy life expectancy.

On general life expectancy, I was going to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who is no longer in his place; I know we all have other commitments in other bits of the House today. The Office for National Statistics releases period life expectancy by local area of the UK, but not by individual parliamentary constituency. Life expectancy at birth in Glasgow is 73 years for men and 78 years for women, and it has increased by four years for men and more than two years for women since 2001 to 2003; it has increased in every area of the UK over the same period. Cohort life expectancy at birth in Scotland is currently 87 for men and 90 for women, and cohort life expectancy at age 65 in Scotland is currently 19 years for men and 21 years for women.

I turn to healthy life expectancy. The latest ONS statistics show that 65-year-olds in the UK are expected to live over half their remaining life in good health, at 11.2 years for women and 10.4 years for men. Healthy life expectancy as a whole has increased over recent decades, and healthy life expectancy at age 65 as a proportion of total life expectancy has been relatively stable since the year 2000. I apologise that I do not have the data for the specific area of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Graeme Morris), but I am happy to write to him on the specifics. I know his constituency very well; it is down the road from mine. In Scotland, healthy life expectancy at age 65 has increased in recent years. I believe that addresses that point.

I stand here defending not only the Conservative Government but the coalition Government and the Labour Government who were in power for 13 years, as well as the nine different Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions and 11 Pensions Ministers over that time, some of whom are still serving in this House today: the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman); the Deputy Speaker, the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton); and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper); and various other Members such as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), all of whom supported the policy changes that took place because of the increase in life expectancy.

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I was waiting until he finalised his point. This issue goes all the way back to when it started in 1995, under various Governments who had decades of opportunities to let people know about the changes. The ball has got to stop somewhere. The buck that gets passed around has stopped here with this Government. This is real now. These women are being left destitute. Given all the failures of the past, will he now do something to help the women rather than just say, “Oh, well, it’s not just me. Other people could have done something and didn’t.”? It is him now and he can do something about it.

Guy Opperman: The issue of communication has been addressed on an ongoing basis in this House and in the Work and Pensions Committee, which did a highly detailed assessment of the matter a couple of years ago. The matter began in 1993 and received considerable publicity at the time. Since 1995, the Government have gone to significant lengths to communicate the changes in various ways—

Mrs Hodgson indicated dissent.

Guy Opperman: She asked me the question—let me finish. The Government have gone to significant lengths to communicate the changes to ensure that those affected were fully aware of their rights. That has been done using a range of formats, communication methods and styles—as I have explained, it has been gone through in a multitude of ways by the Work and Pensions Committee—including communication campaigns, information online, and individual letters posted to approximately 1.2 million women who were directly affected by the 1995 Act changes. A further 5 million letters were sent later to those affected by the 2011 Act changes between January 2012 and November 2013. Between April 2010 and the end of September 2018, the Department for Work and Pensions provided more than 24 million personalised state pension statements, and we continue to encourage individuals to request a personalised state pension statement.

On transitional arrangements, the coalition Government and previous Governments gave careful consideration to a range of options that were debated at great length in this House on repeated occasions. The matter was debated during the passage of the 1995 Act, the 2007 Act, the 2011 Act and the 2014 Act. Any amendment to the current legislation that created a new inequality between men and women would unquestionably be highly dubious as a matter of law. Secondly, causing younger people to bear a greater share of the cost of the pension system in that way would be unfair and would undermine the principle of intergenerational fairness that is integral to our state pension reforms.

Mrs Hodgson: On that point about intergenerational fairness, we have to factor in the unfairness that the 1950s women face for all the reasons that have been set out: historical reasons such as paying a lower stamp, women not working as often as men, and spending time at home when they had children. With regard to intergenerational fairness, I think the younger generation accept that it is different for the 1950s women.

Guy Opperman: I take the hon. Lady’s point, but that matter was unquestionably considered by female Ministers such as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. As the matter has been debated on an ongoing basis, it has been an evolutionary process throughout the past 23 years. I am the latest of many different Ministers who have stood in this post, and I continue to defend the actions of Governments and Ministers who went before me.

Mhairi Black: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will give way to the hon. Lady, but first I want to address the point about complaints that was raised by the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and others.

A number of different processes were raised in respect of complaints, including departmental complaints. The Government have worked extensively—there is no change in the policy approach to departmental complaints under this Government or previous Governments—to engage with a significant amount of correspondence from women who have contacted them on this issue. There have been approximately 8,000 complaints on the topic and a significant amount of resource has been dedicated to it. The Government believe there has been no maladministration within the Department for Work and Pensions with regard to the communication of state pension age changes under this or previous Governments.

We have an Independent Case Examiner. If the House will bear with me, I will explain the processes. The steps the Department took to notify the general public about changes to state pension age have undergone additional scrutiny by the Independent Case Examiner, an independent office holder who reviews complaints about the Department for Work and Pensions. The Independent Case Examiner does not consider policy or legislative issues, but examines whether the Department for Work and Pensions has appropriately administered stated policies or procedures. The Independent Case Examiner’s team has concluded investigations into approximately 185 women's state pension cases to date, and in every case there was no finding that the Department had failed to provide appropriate notice of the changes.

I will finish the last two aspects on complaints and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South.

We also have a Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Some complaints have been escalated to the ombudsman, who has identified a sample of cases that they feel reflect the issues raised in the WASPI complaints. They are now considering whether to investigate, and, if so, the scope of that investigation. Should they decide to investigate, the Government will co-operate in full with that process.

Finally, colleagues will be aware that there is an ongoing judicial review application. It would be inappropriate for me to comment in any detail on the legal case. I can confirm that the High Court has refused the claimant permission to apply for judicial review, but I understand there is a reapplication for oral permission. I spent 10 years both suing and defending the Government as a judicial review lawyer. My last client was a gentleman by the name of Ed Balls when he was Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. I will not comment on the merit of the matter, because it is for an individual judge to decide. Now I give way to the hon. Lady.

Mhairi Black: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister for giving way; no doubt I am probably getting on his nerves after all this time. Can the Government not concede that there has clearly been terrible communication? It was 14 years before letters went out, and now that women are coming forward and saying how hard this issue is hitting them—and bearing in mind the lives and the inequalities that they have suffered—the Government are still not listening to them. When he talks about intergenerational fairness, my generation is looking at how the Government are treating the older generation because they are our aunties or grannies, so how can we have any faith in the pension system? Will there even be a pension system years from now?

Guy Opperman: The point of having a balance between spending on state pensions and the number of people coming into receipt of the state pension is to ensure that there is a state pension in the future. With a larger number of people becoming pensioners, any Government has to make assessments, as has been shown, and that is what has happened.

Ben Lake: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will give way in a second. First I will address the poverty point.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) raised the issue of poverty and others have raised the United Nations report. In the early 1970s, roughly 40% of pensioners were in relative poverty. That figure is now down to 16%, one of the lowest rates since comparable records began. No one disputes that more has to be done, but that is a significant improvement. Since 2010, there are 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty before housing costs. That is a record low. The reality is that we spend approximately
£121 billion on benefits for pensioners, which includes the £97 billion spent on state pensions this year—2018-19. The overall trend in the percentage of pensioners living in poverty is of a significant fall over several decades. At the same stage, the basic state pension has risen by £660 more than if it had just been uprated by earnings since 2010.

Ben Lake: I understand the Minister’s argument about the need to ensure that the number of people entering the state pension system is equalled out, but surely if we are to readdress the matter or rebalance any imbalance, it would be far fairer to do so for those in my generation, who have decades to plan for our pension and retirement, than to punish the women who for decades worked and strove, in the reasonable expectation of retiring on a particular date.

Guy Opperman: That is the debate that, clearly, has to be held. I return to the point that the decision was originally taken in 1993 by my—then very youthful—right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and was supported by a series of Governments and Ministers way more experienced than I am, who have been here over the past twenty-something years. I am merely continuing that debate and discussion about how we progress.

Patricia Gibson: I thought I heard the Minister say that there had been a fall in pensioner poverty. That leads me to question where he gets his information. The UN special rapporteur was clear: between 2012-13 and 2016-17 there was a 300,000 rise in pensioner poverty in the UK, which he specifically linked to the rise in state pension age. Is the special rapporteur wrong?

Guy Opperman: We may take some time to dissect the specific figures on that, but I will attempt to do so—[Interruption.]—if the hon. Lady bears with me.

One starts with the basic principle that the figure used to be at 40% for relative poverty and is now down to 16%. The reason for the 300,000 increase is that more pensioners are in relative poverty after housing costs. That is the issue in relation to relative poverty, because in the past few years the housing costs of those of working age have reduced, because of lower mortgage rates. That reduction in housing costs increases income for those with mortgages, and that pushes median income up. That then feeds through to increase the number of pensioners who are below the 60% of median income poverty line, as the vast majority of pensioners do not have a mortgage and so do not see any benefit from lower mortgage rates. There can be a discussion about relative and absolute poverty and how to measure them, but the overall trend is dramatically down for such poverty, and I believe the explanation of what the rapporteur said is as I have just set out.

I have not addressed the specific point about the Scottish National party proposals and the vexed question of the Scotland Act 2016. As I understand it, various previous proposals—and specifically the one outlined today—would reverse the 2011 Act in its entirety. The SNP’s projected cost for that is £8 billion. We manifestly disagree and suggest it would be in the region of £30 billion, with further costs as long as women’s state pension age was below 66.

As to the Scotland Act powers, I accept that the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran and for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) and I have had robust debate on many such occasions, but I would always say as I have previously, “Don’t take this from me.” I will read the letter from Jeane Freeman of 22 June 2017, in which she sets out what payments can potentially be made under sections 26, 28 and 24 of the Scotland Act 2016. Under the heading of section 26 she states:

“...This power is limited to providing help with ‘short term needs’, and those needs must require to be met to avoid a risk to a person’s wellbeing... Their needs and the risks to their well-being would have to be assessed individually.”

Mhairi Black: Will the Minister give way?

Guy Opperman: I will set these things out, and then the hon. Lady can come back at me.

On the creation of the benefit under section 28, I point out with great respect to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South that in paragraph 3 of the same letter, her own party’s Pensions Minister in Scotland rebuts the point on old age—and she puts “old age” in inverted commas:

“I accept that ‘old age’ is not defined in the legislation, and that most people would not regard this age group as old”.

Under section 28, there is the capability to create a new benefit. That is the heading that Jeane Freeman gives to the relevant part of the letter: “Creation of a new benefit using section 28”. Finally, the situation on top-up and reserve benefits under section 24 is also set out.

Mhairi Black: I am very appreciative again that the Minister has given way. I want to say something very directly. First, if he is suggesting that the Scottish Government should mitigate the situation, that does not solve the problem for the rest of the UK, where women are suffering just as much. Secondly, that leads me to question who is responsible. If he wants us to take the burden, will he devolve pensions control to us to let us do it? Currently he is saying, “With the limited powers you have, try and fix this whole problem.” It is like giving us control over the window wipers and complaining about the direction of the car. What he suggests has nothing to do with the issue. Does the Minister support the Scottish Government taking full responsibility for pensions?

Guy Opperman: I am not going to re-litigate and re-debate the Scotland Act 2016. I accept that the Scottish Parliament cannot provide assistance by way of a pension to individuals who qualify by reason of old age. However, those who have not attained state pension age are, by definition, of working age, and are not therefore being provided support by reason of old age, and therefore the restriction relied upon by the hon. Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire South and for North Ayrshire and Arran does not apply.

We spend about £50 billion a year on welfare disability support in this country, and the key choice facing any Government of any form when seeking to control and manage state pension expenditure is whether to increase the state pension age or to pay lower pensions, with an inevitable impact on pensioner poverty. The only alternative is to ask the working generation to pay an ever-larger
[Guy Opperman]

share of their income to support pensioners. Successive Governments have made appropriate, difficult decisions to equalise and increase the state pension age, and we do not intend to change that today.

3.37 pm

Patricia Gibson: I know that I have just two or three minutes to sum up the debate. I am beyond disappointed. We have heard nothing new today. We have seen again a huge lack of any real and meaningful engagement from the UK Government. That lack of engagement has to end. It is dismissive of and disrespectful to an entire generation of women.

Giving speeches on the history of pensions is not what the debate was about, and it does nothing to address either the fact that women’s pensions were stolen or the suffering caused as a result. The debate was not about life expectancy; it was about the theft perpetrated upon women. These women were often excluded from company and workplace pensions. They raised families and cared for relatives and they have now been abandoned by the UK Government. To be told that there is no solution, as we heard from one Government Member today, is frankly an insult. It is not good enough, and the campaign will go on.

Brexit is entirely consuming UK politics, but we can and will continue to keep this issue firmly on the agenda. These women are our mothers, sisters, grannies and wives, and the UK Government have not heard the last of this. The entire state pension system has been undermined by this travesty. A social contract has been broken, and I remind those in this place that an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered state pension equalisation for women born in the 1950s.

3.39 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statement

Monday 12 November 2018

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Wales-England Cross-border Healthcare

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Lord O'Shaughnessy) has made the following written statement:

Whilst delivery of healthcare across the border between England and Wales is collaborative and high-quality, the Government are aware of the problems that a significant number of patients living along the Welsh-English border have faced for a number of years in accessing healthcare in accordance with their rights under the NHS constitution. We are pleased that a new statement of values and principles, co-produced by NHS England, the Welsh Government and the local system is now ready for publication.

The new statement will replace the existing cross-border protocol, which was established in 2005, revised in 2013 and agreed between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Welsh Government with input from the system. This protocol outlined the process for residents living along the Welsh-English border in accessing healthcare and which bodies were legally and financially responsible for these patients. Soon after the publication it was realised that the protocol did not comply with English law in that it did not safeguard the constitutional rights of English residents living along the border and registered with Welsh GPs—those residents were unable to exercise their rights to English standards in terms of waiting times for treatment and choice of secondary care provider. Since then, extensive work has been conducted on both sides of the border to ensure this is possible.

NHS England and the Welsh Government, working with clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and local health boards (LHBs), have developed the new statement to replace the existing protocol and to address the issues that have arisen from it. The new statement allows patients to exercise their rights under the NHS constitution by being referred to a provider under contract with NHS England or electing to receive treatment in Wales, waiving those rights and accepting Welsh standards.

The Government are pleased that the process for producing the new statement has been collaborative across the border and has involved affected stakeholders to ensure it is acceptable and appropriate. We note the diligence by which constituency MPs, especially my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), have sought a solution and also commend the work by Action4ourCare to reach a way forward. We hope this statement of values and principles provides a long-term resolution.

[HCWS1076]
Written Statements

Tuesday 13 November 2018

CABINET OFFICE

EU (Withdrawal) Act: Common Frameworks

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I have today laid before Parliament a report, “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks—26 June 2018 to 25 September 2018” as required by paragraph 4 of schedule 3 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The report will be made available on gov.uk and details the progress made in discussions between the UK Government and devolved Administrations regarding common frameworks in the first reporting period covered under the legislation, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

[HCWS1078]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB Strategy Review

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I am pleased to report that a review of the Government’s 25-year bovine TB strategy, led by Sir Charles Godfray, has been published today. The Government welcome the report and I extend my thanks to Sir Charles and his team for their hard work.

The report, which was commissioned by the Secretary of State in February 2018, aims to explore different approaches to disease control to inform future policy and maintain progress towards our target of achieving officially TB free status by 2038.

As a Government we are committed to eradicating bovine TB and have always been clear that there is no single measure for tackling this disease. That is why we have pursued a range of interventions, including cattle movement controls, vaccination, and controlled culling in certain areas.

Sir Charles’ report is an important contribution that will inform next steps and help us to take the strategy to the next phase. The Government will consider its recommendations carefully. A formal response will be published in due course.

[HCWS1077]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In May, I appointed commissioners to undertake the strategic finance and governance functions in Northamptonshire County Council as a result of the findings of the best value inspection published in March this year.

In October, Ofsted conducted a two-day visit to look at children’s services in the council, and has published its findings today. Children’s services in Northamptonshire were rated “requires improvement” overall by Ofsted at its last inspection in 2016, but have deteriorated significantly since then. There are particular concerns about the relatively high number of unallocated and unassessed cases, and a social care workforce that are highly dependent on agency staff. The letter from Ofsted states:

“when children in Northamptonshire are referred to children’s social care, they are not consistently or effectively assessed, supported or protected.”

A copy of this letter is available in the Library of the House.

The commissioners have also written to me and the Education Secretary to highlight their concerns about children’s services, recommending that an additional commissioner is appointed to strengthen the Government intervention in this area.

Having carefully considered the evidence and having spoken to the commissioners, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and I agree that we should act swiftly to strengthen the focus on children in the current intervention, by appointing an additional commissioner to the existing commissioner team. Keeping vulnerable children safe is one of the most important duties local authorities carry out and any deterioration in the performance of Northamptonshire children’s services cannot continue.

The Secretary of State for Education has therefore announced that he is minded to appoint a children’s services commissioner for Northamptonshire under the powers granted to him by Parliament under section 497A(4B) of the Education Act 1996. This will help to stabilise and improve the service so each and every child receives the protection they deserve. The commissioner would also help the authority decide how best to deliver children’s services after the potential local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire. The Secretary of State for Education and I will receive regular progress reports from our commissioner team.

The Secretary of State for Education sees Malcolm Newsam CBE as a very strong candidate for the role of children’s services commissioner. Mr Newsam is an experienced director of children’s services. He has worked in a number of local authorities, including as children services commissioner in Sandwell, and previously as an executive commissioner for children’s services in Rotherham, working closely with other Government commissioners as part of a wider Government intervention.

Additional children’s services capacity has also been brought in through the Department for Education’s Partners in Practice programme, with Lincolnshire County Council providing practical support and improvement advice.

The Secretary of State for Education will consider any representations on his proposal, which are made in the next week by Northamptonshire County Council, before deciding whether or not to appoint a children’s services commissioner.
Written Statements
Wednesday 14 November 2018

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 6 November 2018. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue

EU Finance Ministers were joined by representatives of the EFTA countries and held an exchange of views on the opportunities and challenges of FinTech to the financial sector and economic growth.

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 5 November meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. The Council also held an exchange of views on the annual report of the European Fiscal Board.

Digital services tax

The Council held an exchange of views on the state of play of the negotiations on the digital services tax directive.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Austrian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European Court of Auditors’ annual report

The President of the Court of Auditors presented the auditors’ report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2017 financial year.

EU statistical package

The Council adopted Council conclusions on the autumn EU statistical package.

Conclusions on climate finance

The Council adopted Council conclusions on climate finance as part of the annual process in the run up to the United Nations framework convention on climate change conference of parties in Poland on 2 to 14 Dec.

Follow-up to the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings in Indonesia

The Austrian presidency and the Commission presented the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings between 11 and 12 October in Bali, Indonesia.

[HCWS1081]

DEFENCE

Veterans Strategy

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson):
Following the 100-year anniversary of the 1918 Armistice, the time is right to review how we continue to support and empower veterans in the future. Veterans are an asset to our nation and demonstrate some of the best qualities in our society: responsibility, duty and hard work. We are proud of the care, support and respect our society gives to veterans and have a long history of supporting those who step up to serve their country.

We want to make sure we continue to support veterans and want to do more. By 2028 we will do more to ensure that each veteran is valued, contributing and supported. Today we publish the “Strategy for our Veterans” (Cm 9726) and supporting “UK Government Consultation Paper” (Cm 9727) that outlines what we aim to do and consults on how we will achieve it. This strategy is part of the armed forces covenant, introduced in 2011 to ensure all service personnel, military families and veterans are treated fairly in accessing public and commercial services. Through the covenant, we have radically improved the support we give to veterans across Government, in terms of priority healthcare pathways, access to housing, employment support, and more.

The cross-Government “Strategy for our Veterans” is a remarkable joint statement of strategic intent for UK and devolved Governments. It is the first time Governments across the UK have clearly stated collective tangible outcomes for veterans’ services, and indeed the first time that all four nations of the UK have come together on such a far-reaching topic. It sets a vision and principles for support to veterans, as well as tangible outcomes in a variety of areas. The vision and principles are enduring and extend beyond the horizon of the strategy. Together, they state the long-term goal against which we will organise services for veterans throughout the UK. To deliver the vision and principles we have set outcomes for a number of cross-cutting factors and themes that will give us tangible aspiration to measure success. There are five cross-cutting factors that provide a backdrop to the overall system of veterans’ service provision as well as six identified themes. For each of the cross-cutting factors and themes there is an outcome for 2028 towards which all UK nations will work to deliver.

Today we also publish the complementary “UK Government Consultation Paper” that seeks the public’s view on how to build upon existing services. We would like comments from any public organisation that provides a service for veterans, from charities in the armed forces sector and other sectors who assist veterans, from private sector companies, and of course from veterans themselves. This consultation is UK-wide, although the Scottish Government and Welsh Government will consult separately on devolved matters.

The “Strategy for our Veterans” and accompanying “UK Government Consultation Paper” will be debated in the House of Commons and House of Lords on 15 November 2018.

[HCWS1080]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Fixed Odds Betting Terminals

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright):
The Government are today announcing that the implementation of changes to reduce the stakes of B2 gaming machines from £100 to £2 will take place in April 2019. This will be done through a statutory instrument, laid before the House this week.
Following the consultation on gaming machines and social responsibility measures, the Government decided to cut the maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals to £2 to help stop extreme losses by those who can least afford it and protect the most vulnerable in our society.

After a thorough consultation with interested parties, including charities, campaigners and the gambling industry, across government we reached a decision to make this significant change in October 2019.

The Government have been clear that protecting vulnerable people is the prime concern, but that as a responsible Government it is also right to take the needs of those employed by the gambling industry into account and provide time for an orderly transition.

Parliament has, however, been clear it wants this change to be made sooner. The Government have listened and will now implement the reduction in April 2019.

In order to cover the negative impact on the public finances, and to protect vital public services, this change is being linked to an increase in remote gaming duty, paid by online gaming operators. The Finance Bill will also be amended so that the increase to remote gaming duty comes into effect in April 2019.

The Government will expect the gambling industry to work with it to reduce the effect of any impact on jobs and to support employees that may be affected by this expedited timeline. The cross-government group that has been set up is ready to assist.

Finally, the Government will continue to take action to protect vulnerable people, including strengthening protections around gaming machines, online gambling, gambling advertising and treatment for problem gambling.
Written Statements

CABINET OFFICE

Prosperity Fund: Annual Report

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I wish to update the House on the progress of the cross-Government prosperity fund (PF) for the financial year 2017-18.

Created two years ago, the £1.2 billion prosperity fund runs over seven years from 2016 to 2023. It forms an integral part of the UK’s aid strategy, and official development assistance commitment of 0.7% of GNI.

The prosperity fund is grounded on the premise that economic growth, when sustainable and inclusive, can raise welfare and prosperity in middle income countries. It can also benefit trade and investment with partners such as the United Kingdom. Middle income countries present huge untapped economic potential, yet are home to around 60% of the world’s poor. They often seek our partnership and expertise, and opportunities to trade and grow out of poverty rather than traditional aid.

As the Prime Minister set out during her visit to Africa in August this year, we need to work with these countries; sharing our skills, our experience and our resources to tackle the challenges we face, and to deliver prosperity and security for everyone. The prosperity fund is a key driver of this. It removes barriers to trade, builds prosperous partnerships, and enables international and UK business to seize new opportunities. All whilst helping to meet the United Nations global goals for sustainable development and deepening the UK’s relationships with countries across the globe.

Following a review of the cross-Government funds, undertaken as part of the national security capability review, ministerial oversight of the prosperity fund and the conflict stability and security fund is now the responsibility of a sub-committee of the National Security Council. The sub-committee, which I chair, ensures that both funds deliver effectively on national security priorities and UK aid objectives. The cross-Government approach of the two funds allows them to deliver interventions that draw on expertise from across Government to tackle today’s stubborn global challenges.

The prosperity fund’s second annual report details progress made in 2017-18 towards development of the full portfolio: 26 multi-year programmes operating until 2023, across investment in infrastructure and human capital; innovation and technology; increasing trade; financial and economic reform; and ease of doing business. Priority countries and regions include: Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Nigeria, South Africa, China, India and southeast Asia.

In 2017-18 the total spend for the fund was £63 million, of which £7 million was for non-ODA activities. Several programmes are already delivering, like the FCO led global cities programme, which is providing support to Cape Town to better mitigate against climate-related shocks, such as their recent severe drought, which threatened

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Criminal Justice System: Disclosure

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): Today, carrying forward the work of my predecessor, I have published the results of the Government’s review of the efficiency and effectiveness of disclosure in the criminal justice system. This has been laid before Parliament as a Command Paper (Cm 9735), and copies are available in the Vote Office and on gov.uk.

The disclosure of unused material in criminal cases, under the statutory framework of the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996, is a central pillar of the right to a fair trial and a fundamental part of our criminal justice system in England and Wales. My review of disclosure builds on the operational response by the police and Crown Prosecution Service to the challenges of disclosure under the National Disclosure Improvement Plan. The review sets out the next phase of reforms to deliver sustainable change for the long term.

The review identifies the following cross-system themes and makes recommendations for improvement in respect of each of them:

1. Primary legislation continues to provide an appropriate disclosure regime, but in practice the system is not working as effectively or efficiently as it should;
2. Practical reinforcement of the duty to make reasonable lines of inquiry and apply the disclosure test correctly;
3. Pursuing a fair investigation and considering disclosure obligations from the outset, rather than as an afterthought;
4. Proportionate “frontloading” of disclosure preparation and performance;
5. Early and meaningful engagement with disclosure issues by the defence and the judiciary;
6. Harnessing Technology;
7. Data and Management Information;
8. Continuous, sustained oversight and improvement.

These themes reflect the systemic nature of the management of disclosure and the importance of everyone involved—including the police, prosecutors and the defence community—playing their part effectively.

Cases that are stopped and convictions that are quashed because of serious deficiencies in disclosure are neither fair to the complainant nor the defendant and they undermine public confidence in the administration of criminal justice. However, while there have been too many cases where disclosure failures have occurred, it is not a problem in all cases. Victims should not be afraid to come forward and we must not undermine the progress made in encouraging people to report offences.

In order to ensure the review’s recommendations are followed through, implementation and oversight will happen under the aegis of the Criminal Justice Board.

[HCWS1083]
jobs and growth in the region. The remainder are going through final stages of approval or procurement before they begin.

A copy of the 2017-18 prosperity fund annual report has been placed in the libraries of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government’s continued commitment to transparency in the delivery of official development assistance.

[HCWS1088]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 19 November in Brussels.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be a Council regulation fixing the fishing opportunities for certain deep-sea fish stocks for 2019 and 2020, for which the Commission is seeking political agreement.

The primary focus for agriculture will be a policy discussion on the common agricultural policy (CAP) post 2020. The Council will discuss two regulations during this item: the first on financing, management, and monitoring of the CAP, and the second on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products.

The Commission will then provide an update on the situation in EU agricultural markets. There will also be an exchange of views on Task Force Rural Africa (TFRA) and on current challenges in the field of plant protection.

There is currently one item scheduled under “any other business”: information from the Commission on the implementation of the European maritime and fisheries fund (EMFF).

[HCWS1085]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 19 November 2018

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 19 November. It will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini, and will take place in Brussels.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, central Asia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Yemen.

Foreign Affairs Council

Central Asia

Ministers will discuss the EU’s role in central Asia ahead of the EU-Central Asia Foreign Ministers’ meeting on 23 November that HRVP Mogherini and Foreign Ministers from the five central Asian states will attend. The significance of the region has grown as Russia seeks to reassert its influence with countries to its south and as China continues to expand its westward trade routes. There are positive regional dynamics with better co-operation between states, as well as engagement with Afghanistan. The UK supports the EU expanding its activity across the central Asian region.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ministers will discuss the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) following the elections on 7 October. The UK will work with partners to promote a balanced and constructive European approach to BiH, focusing on the urgent needs for Government formation and socio-economic and other reforms for the benefit of all BiH citizens.

Ukraine

Ministers will discuss the situation on Yemen and how best to support the UN special envoy to make progress towards a sustainable political settlement that will underpin a long-term solution in Yemen. We will encourage all EU partners to support the UN special envoy’s proposals for de-escalation and confidence-building measures including the talks that he will convene in Stockholm at the end of November.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions on security and defence, Afghanistan, small arms and light weapons (SALW), the civilian compact, Pakistan, water diplomacy, Sudan and Ethiopia.

[HCWS1084]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

National Cervical Screening Programme Incident

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): I am today informing the House of a serious incident relating to the ‘call and recall’ process administered by Primary Care Support England (PCSE), a service provided by Capita on behalf of NHS England as part of the national cervical cancer screening programme.
The NHS cervical cancer screening programme saves an estimated 5,000 lives a year by detecting abnormalities of the cervix early and referring women for effective treatment. It is offered to women aged 25 to 49 every three years and those aged 50 to 64 every five years.

On 17 October, NHS England and Public Health England were informed by Capita that a number of cervical screening invitation and reminder letters had not been sent to women inviting them to make a routine cervical screening appointment. Following further urgent investigation of this incident since then, I can now confirm that between January and June 2018, 43,220 women did not receive one or other of these letters and, in a very small minority of cases, neither the invitation nor reminder. In addition, Capita has also informed us that, between January and October 2018, a further 4,508 women were not sent letters informing them of the result of their cervical screening.

In light of this, NHS England declared this as a serious incident and set up a clinically-led multiagency incident panel including PCSE, Public Health England and NHS Digital on 23 October 2018 to assess any risk or harm to the women affected. The panel has put in place actions to assess and mitigate any risk as well as care and support where needed. Daily audits are now in place to ensure all women’s files are accounted for, and the panel is looking closely with Capita at how parts of the process could be automated to reduce errors.

Capita has confirmed that this incident was caused by files from their call and recall operations team not being correctly sent and uploaded to Capita’s print and despatch service between January and October 2018. Capita has accepted full responsibility for this incident and has apologised for it.

For the majority of the 4,508 women who did not receive their result letter, their result was normal. However, 182 women had a result that required a follow-up test (colposcopy) and 252 women needed an early repeat screening test. In most instances, where the screening result requires further tests or treatments, the laboratory will usually refer the woman directly to a colposcopy clinic independently of the woman receiving her result letter from Capita. For women needing early repeat testing, their GP routinely follows up these tests. However, to make sure all women needing a colposcopy or an early repeat test are being managed correctly, every woman’s screening record is being checked to ensure they have been referred appropriately. No harm has been identified to date.

Capita has made a public apology and has written to all the women who did not receive invitation or reminder letters and to those who did not get their normal result letter. Letters and apologies are being sent to all women who have not been referred for colposcopy or who have not had the required follow up screening test. In addition, the GPs of women affected have been informed so they can offer support to their patients.

The results of the screening and further tests on all women affected by this incident will be monitored over time to ensure any impact is followed up.

In addition to reviewing the checks in place around file transfer and checking the number of files processed, sent, printed and dispatched, Capita has produced a briefing for staff and proposed additional automation to the process to remove manual steps that may have contributed to this incident.

Our priority is patient safety and we will be assembling a clinical board that will provide oversight for the cervical screening call and recall service. This will ensure that every part of the process has an in-depth review.

NHS England is also undertaking an independent expert review of its screening programmes.

The Government continue to closely monitor the performance of all our suppliers and to implement improvement plans where necessary. Officials are working with Capita to ensure that the process recommendations and lessons learned from this issue are applied to similar services across Capita’s public sector contracts.

Incidents of this type not only are unacceptable in terms of the impact they have on the women affected, but undermine public confidence in our screening programmes as a whole.

[HCWS1086]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Rural Crime and Public Services: Response to Opposition Day Debate

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): On 6 June 2018 this Parliament debated a motion about rural crime and public services. Many of the crimes mentioned during the debate, such as domestic violence and modern slavery, know no boundaries and can be found in urban and rural areas alike. However, the Government recognise that certain crimes, such as hare coursing and livestock offences, can be an additional pressure in rural areas.

We therefore welcome the rural affairs strategy published by the National Police Chiefs’ Council which, developed following a period of consultation with rural stakeholders, sets out operational and organisational policing priorities in respect of tackling crimes that particularly affect rural areas. It is very much intended that the strategy will support safer rural communities and a better rural focus in policing.

Members on all sides of the House emphasised the need to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged in the delivery or quality of public services to tackle crime. The Government are committed to providing all police forces in England and Wales with the resources they need to do their crucial work. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer made clear at the Budget, we recognise the pressures on the police from the changing nature of crime. The Home Secretary is reviewing police spending power and further options for reform ahead of the provisional police funding settlement in December.

In 2017, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service spoke to every police force in England and Wales about the demands they faced, including many frontline officers. Alongside that, the Home Office undertook a robust assessment of demands and pressures on the police which found that, since 2015, there had been substantial changes in the demands on the police, with the make-up of recorded crime shifting towards more complex and resource intensive crimes, such as sexual offences and modern slavery. Increases in the reporting of high harm “hidden” crimes have affected both urban and rural forces across England and Wales.
This work led directly to a comprehensive funding settlement that is increasing total investment in the police by over £460 million in 2018-19. This includes £50 million for counter-terrorism, £130 million for national priorities and £280 million in force funding from increases in council tax precept income. The pressures on territorial policing were spread across England and Wales, so it was right to enable every police force, rural and urban alike, to protect their funding in real terms in 2018-19, including precept income.

Our work on demand is continuing. We are working closely with the policing sector in order to build the evidence base for the next spending review, to ensure the police continue to receive the resources they need. The existing police allocation formula includes population sparsity as a factor. The Government will consider the issue of the police funding formula in the context of the next spending review.

[HCWS1087]
The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): On 15 November 2018 the General Court of the Court of Justice of the European Union found in favour of Tempus Energy, against the European Commission, removing the Commission’s state aid approval for the UK capacity market. The Court held that the Commission should have consulted more fully before granting state aid approval in 2014.

This judgment was decided on procedural grounds. It was not a challenge to the nature of the UK capacity market mechanism itself.

The judgment removes state aid approval for the capacity market, preventing the UK Government from holding any capacity auctions or making any capacity payments under existing agreements until re-approval.

National Grid has confirmed that it does not believe the judgment will cause any risk to security of supply this winter. It has informed market participants of the judgement.

We are considering the judgment in detail alongside the European Commission and are working to support it as it considers the legal options available.

We believe the capacity market is an effective mechanism that is designed in such a way as to minimise costs to consumers. The design of the capacity market has not been called into question, and our focus is therefore on ensuring it can be reinstated as soon as possible.

As part of this, we are seeking immediate state aid approval for a T-1 auction that will cover winter 2019-20. Alongside this, we are working to reinstate the full capacity market regime and are discussing the swiftest means of doing so with the Commission.

The Government and National Grid will ensure that market participants are kept updated.

I will keep the House updated as appropriate. [HCWS1090]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 received Royal Assent on 27 April 2017. It set out significant reforms to help ensure that students receive value for money from their investment in higher education. The Act included a power for the Government to set specific annual fee amounts for accelerated degree courses.

An accelerated degree is the equivalent of a standard degree in every sense but one: it is completed one year sooner than its standard equivalent. By studying for more weeks each year and taking shorter breaks between terms, accelerated students can, for example, complete the full content of a three-year degree—but graduate in two years.

In spite of the many benefits, there are currently very few accelerated degree courses available, as the current fee limit creates a financial disincentive for higher education providers.

Accelerated degrees cost more to deliver each year than their standard equivalents because of the higher number of weeks taught each year. Providers, however, can only charge up to the maximum annual fee cap for each year of teaching, regardless of the comparative volume of teaching delivered each year.

During the passage of the 2017 Act, the Government agreed to consult on values for specific accelerated degree fee caps, with the aim of removing the financial barrier and incentivising wider provision. Our consultation proposed a 20% uplift in the annual tuition fee for accelerated degrees.

For example, the annual tuition fee for a two-year accelerated course at a TEF-rated, fee-capped university (that is, a university with an approved access and participation plan and high-level quality rating) would be capped at £11,100 per year, compared with £9,250 per year for the same course taught over three years.

The total fee cost would be £22,200 for the accelerated degree, compared with £27,750 for the standard equivalent—for students, a 20% saving in tuition costs. The £22,200 total revenue for universities offers providers £3,700 per student (80% of the three-year fee) that they can currently charge for the same two-year course.

Today the Government are publishing their response to the accelerated degrees consultation, setting out our intention to proceed with regulations to set the new accelerated degree fee caps as soon as possible, subject to parliamentary approval. The full text of the response can be found on www.gov.uk.

These proposals apply to England only. We will also review the impact of the introduction of accelerated degrees fee caps three years after implementation. Our intention is to also bring forward regulations providing for increased loan amounts for accelerated degree courses.

This announcement will give providers confidence that the arrangements for accelerated courses are here to stay, and are consistent with all types of current non-accelerated fee levels and caps. The higher annual fee cap for accelerated degrees will drive up provision of accelerated courses across a far greater range of providers. Wider provision will in turn offer many more students the choice of applying for an accelerated course with their preferred subject and provider.

The new accelerated degree fee cap is consistent with the Government’s overall ambitions for diverse and flexible post-18 education, currently being developed through the ongoing review of post-18 education and funding. [HCWS1091]
operation of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in line with the process set out in section 26 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

The review will commence in December this year and we expect the reviewer to report in summer 2019.

Dame Shirley has a distinguished track record in higher education and has made an outstanding contribution to a number of other areas of public life.

This makes her an excellent choice to lead this review and clearly shows that she will command the confidence of HE providers.

I will place a copy of her detailed biography in the House Libraries.

Further details and guidance will be published on www.gov.uk.
Written Statements

Tuesday 20 November 2018

EDUCATION

Universal Children’s Day

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Today is Universal Children’s Day, a day that marks the anniversary of the date that the UN General Assembly adopted both the declaration and the convention on the rights of the child.

The UK is a proud and long-standing signatory of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC) and this Government remain fully committed to the promotion and safeguarding of children’s rights.

The UNCRC sets out an enduring vision for all children to grow up in a loving, safe and happy environment where they can develop their full potential, regardless of their background. This Government share that vision and are dedicated to providing the best possible opportunities for all children but especially those who have the hardest start in life.

It has now been over two years since the UN scrutinised the UK’s progress in implementing the UNCRC and published their concluding observations. Since the last report, the UK Government have continued to raise ambition for all children and have made concrete progress in making sure that all children have the opportunity to thrive and develop.

For example, my Department has:

- strengthened the quality and range of support for society’s most vulnerable children through the Children and Social Work Act 2017;
- revised the “Working Together to Safeguard Children” guidance to better safeguard and promote the welfare of children;
- improved support for children’s mental health in schools;
- we are making relationships and sex education compulsory for all secondary school pupils so that young people learn what healthy, safe and respectful relationships look like.

We, as parliamentarians, all play a role in building a fairer society where children can lead happy lives and fulfil their potential. I urge all Government Departments to consider what more they can do to make sure their policies promote the best interests of the child. To help Government Departments to do this, we are proud to be launching a comprehensive children’s rights training package across Government today, which has been developed with the support of children’s rights experts. I strongly encourage my ministerial colleagues to encourage the civil servants in their Departments to take up this training so that children’s rights are further embedded in policy and law making.

In 2010, the UK Government made a commitment to give due consideration to the UNCRC when making policy and legislation. As we approach the 30th anniversary of the convention on the rights of the child, I would like to reaffirm the value that this Government place on the UNCRC and our ongoing commitment to give due consideration to the UNCRC when making policy and legislation.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Post-Council: EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) took place in Brussels on 9 November 2018. I represented the UK at the meeting. A summary of the discussions follows.

WTO modernisation

Member states unanimously supported the Commission’s approach to modernising the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The discussion focused on the blocking of new appointments to the WTO appellate body and what this meant for its ability to function as the most urgent and serious issue. The functioning of the WTO more generally was also discussed. I highlighted the significance of these issues, and the need for political engagement to support the international rules-based system. I also highlighted the importance of engaging developing countries in the process of reforming the WTO.

Legislative files

The presidency provided updates on foreign direct investment screening and the bilateral safeguard regulation. The Commissioner is seeking political agreement on both files by the end of November. The Commissioner also called on Council to agree a mandate for the recast of the existing EU dual-use regulation by the end of 2018.

Ongoing trade negotiations

The Commissioner updated the Council on the state of play of ongoing EU trade negotiations. On EU-Vietnam, the Commission had adopted and published the English language text for Council decisions on the signature and conclusion of the free trade agreement (FTA) and the investment protection agreement (IPA). The Commissioner also informed Ministers that the European Parliament was due to vote on the EU-Japan economic partnership agreement (EPA) in December and on the EU-Singapore FTA and IPA in early 2019.

The Commission hoped to conclude negotiations with Mercosur and to present the Mexico agreement at the earliest opportunity ahead of the European Parliament elections in spring 2019.

Negotiations were also progressing with Chile, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand and Tunisia, and on a multilateral investment court (MIC).

Implementation of EU FTAs

The Commissioner presented the EU’s second annual implementation report. She highlighted how FTAs remove trade barriers and open markets, while allowing protection of sensitive products. She also noted that insufficient preference utilisation rates can leave some of the potential from FTAs untapped.

Member states welcomed the report. I highlighted the UK’s ratification of CETA on 8 November and suggested that more could be done to demonstrate the development impact of economic partnership agreements.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am today laying before Parliament “The Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report 2018”. This is the seventh report since the Armed Forces Act 2011 established the armed forces covenant and set out the requirement for the Defence Secretary to report progress annually to Parliament. The covenant is a promise by the nation to ensure that those who serve, or have served, and their families are treated fairly and suffer no disadvantage. Special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given the most such as the injured or the bereaved. The sacrifices made by serving personnel, veterans and their families should be recognised accordingly.

I am proud to present this report to Parliament, describing what the Government have done to uphold the principles of the covenant. In the context of the 100-year anniversary of the Armistice, it is particularly important to consider the role of the armed forces in society today. Following the recent launch of the “Strategy for our Veterans” (Cm 9726) and the consultation paper (Cm 9727), the annual report focuses on serving personnel and families, explaining how we provide support to the whole of the armed forces community. The theme of delivering effective support acknowledges the nation’s improving understanding of not just the needs of the armed forces community, but also how we can support them to make best use of the diverse skills and experiences that they offer wider society. While we are now better placed to measure our progress in delivering the covenant and mitigating disadvantage to the armed forces community, we know there is much more still to be achieved, particularly in ensuring consistency of outcomes.

The report covers progress on healthcare, education, accommodation, inquests, family life, through-life support, and business and community. Key highlights of this year’s report include: the expansion of the Department for Education’s common transfer file to capture more contextual information on service children from September 2018; the publication of guidance to ease the impact on serving personnel and families moving between administrations; the announcement of the 3,000th signatory to the covenant; the relocation of the defence medical rehabilitation centre to a new purpose-built facility at Stanford Hall; and the launch of NHS England’s veterans mental health complex treatment service.

The report also explains the creation of the independent Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust as an independent charity, to manage the £10 million per annum covenant fund. The new status will allow a more flexible approach to grant-making.

The report has been compiled in consultation with other Government Departments, the devolved Governments in Wales and Scotland, and with key stakeholders in Northern Ireland. The external members of the covenant reference group, which includes the three service families federations, the Confederation of Service Charities, the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, the War Widows Association and Professor Hew Strachan, have also been consulted.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am announcing today the start of a tailored review of the Student Loans Company, a non-profit making Government-owned organisation, which disperses grants to students in universities and colleges in the UK. The SLC has been classified as an Executive NDPB since 1996 and its current shareholding structure, split between the Department for Education (DFE) and the devolved Administrations, has been in place since 2013.

As a non-department public body (NDPB) sponsored by DFE, the Student Loans Company is required to undergo a tailored review at least once in every Parliament. The principal aims of tailored reviews are to ensure public bodies remain fit for purpose, are well governed and properly accountable for what they do.

The review will provide a robust scrutiny of, and assurance on, the continuing need for the Student Loans Company—both its function and its form. It will assess the governance and control arrangements in place to ensure they are compliant with the recognised principles of good corporate governance and delivering good value for money. The structure, efficiency and effectiveness of the Student Loans Company will be considered throughout the review.

A challenge panel, chaired by a DFE non-executive director, will examine the findings of both stages of the review.

The review will follow guidance published in 2016 by the Cabinet Office: “Tailored Reviews: Guidance on Reviews of Public Bodies”. This can be found on gov.uk.

In conducting this tailored review, officials will engage with a broad range of stakeholders across the UK, including across UK Government, devolved Administrations, business and civil society, as well as with the Student Loans Company’s own staff and management.

I shall inform the House of the outcome of the review when it is completed and copies of the report of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.
Values of the Union—Hungary/article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The presidency informed Ministers of its meeting with the European Parliament to discuss the reasoned opinion.

Rule of law in Poland—article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Commission briefed Ministers on developments since the GAC meeting in October and recommended that there should be a third hearing on the rule of law in Poland at the December GAC.

Preparation of December European Council on 13 and 14 December 2018

Ministers discussed the draft agenda for the December European Council which comprises the multiannual financial framework, the single market, migration and external relations. Ministers welcomed the agenda and, in discussions on migration, called for more progress to be made on the implementation of the approach agreed at previous meetings of the European Council. I intervened to underline the need to disrupt people smuggling networks and their business models and to tackle the challenges of migration upstream.

As part of the discussions on external relations, the European Council will consider measures to address online disinformation. Ministers welcomed the inclusion of a new joint action plan to tackle disinformation in the 2019 Commission work programme. I intervened to highlight the UK’s support for this work and reminded Ministers of the need to ensure that freedom of speech was respected.

Annual rule of law dialogue

Ministers took part in the fourth annual rule of law dialogue and considered the levels of trust that EU citizens have in public institutions. Ministers discussed the threat posed by political apathy, online disinformation and hostile cyber-activity in electoral processes. The presidency will prepare draft conclusions on the dialogue and these will be discussed further by Council working groups.

Multiannual financial framework 2021-27

The Council discussed progress on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) proposals. The Commission and the presidency noted that the significant progress made since June would ensure that leaders would be in a position to discuss the MFF at the European Council meeting in December.

Legislative programming—Commission’s work programme 2019

The Commission presented the Commission work programme for 2019 and set out the measures it will take over the next 10 weeks to conclude proposals in relation to economic growth, competition, climate change, cyber-attacks and disinformation.

Subsidiarity package

The Commission presented its subsidiarity package which was published on 23 October. The package seeks to strengthen the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity in EU decision making. In those areas which do not form part of the EU’s exclusive competence, the principle of subsidiarity means that action should only be taken at EU level when the desired objectives cannot be effectively achieved by action taken at national or regional level.

European semester 2019—road map

The Austrian presidency and the incoming Romanian presidency presented the timetable for the 2019 European semester, which will provide a framework for the co-ordination of economic policies across the EU.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Government Hospitality Wine Cellar Annual Report

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I have today placed a copy of the Government hospitality wine cellar annual report for the financial year 2017-18 in the Libraries of both Houses.

Following the outcome of the review of the Government hospitality wine cellar in 2011, this seventh annual report continues our commitment to annual reporting to Parliament on the use of the wine cellar, covering consumption, stock purchases, costs, and value for money. The wine cellar has been self-funding since 2011-12, through the sale of some high-value stock and payments made by other Government Departments for events organised by Government hospitality.

The report notes that:

- The highest consumption level by volume was again of English and Welsh wine, at 57% of the total (cf. 52% in 16-17);
- The highest volume of purchases was of English and Welsh wines at 64% of the total;
- Consumption by volume increased by some 20% in FY 2017-18 due to an increased number of larger events;
- Sales of stock amounted to £50,600 (cf. £40,800 in FY 16-17);
- Further funds from other Government Departments added £26,494 to the overall receipts (cf. £16,234 in 16-17);
- Purchases amounted to £56,976 (ex-VAT), an increase of 26% by value cf. £45,042 in 16-17.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

[HCWS1098]
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): On 2 July 2018, I made a written ministerial statement confirming that that maximum tuition fees for the 2019-20 academic year in England will be maintained at the levels that apply in the 2018-19 academic year, the second year in succession that fees have been frozen. This means that the maximum level of tuition fees for a full-time course will remain at £9,250 for the next academic year (2019-20).

I can now announce further details of student finance arrangements for higher education students undertaking a course of study in the 2019-20 academic year.

Maximum undergraduate loans for living costs will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2019-20. And the same increase will apply to maximum disabled students’ allowances for students with disabilities undertaking full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in 2019-20. Maximum grants for students with child or adult dependants who are attending full-time undergraduate courses in 2019-20 will also increase by forecast inflation in 2019-20.

We are also increasing support for students undertaking postgraduate courses in 2019-20. Maximum loans for students starting masters degree and doctoral degree courses from 1 August 2019 onwards will be increased by forecast inflation (2.8%) in 2019-20. And for postgraduate students with disabilities, we are increasing the maximum postgraduate disabled students’ allowance to £20,000 in 2019-20 from its current level of £10,993, which will help the most disabled postgraduate students with high support needs.

The Government have created a new form of leave for children under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 (the Dubs amendment). This will ensure that those children who do not qualify for refugee or humanitarian protection leave will still be able to remain in the UK long term. Those who qualify for this new form of leave will be able to study, work, access public funds and healthcare, and apply for settlement after five years, without paying a fee. In line with this change, I can announce today that “Dubs children” starting higher education courses from 1 August 2019 onwards will be subject to home fee status and will be able to apply for student support.

Further details of the student support package for 2019-20 are set out in the document available as an online attachment.

I expect to lay regulations implementing changes to student finance for undergraduates and postgraduates for 2019-20 early in 2019. These regulations will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

The attachment can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-11-22/HCWS1103/.

[HCWS1103]
immigration system will continue to do so. However, it is important that people play by the rules to preserve the integrity of the immigration system.

I will arrange for a copy of the review and accompanying guidance to be placed in the Library of the House and for them to be made available on gov.uk.

[HCWS1102]

PRIME MINISTER

Intelligence Oversight

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) has today laid before Parliament two reports: its report into the terror attacks last year in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green, titled “The 2017 Attacks: What Needs to Change?”; and its annual report 2017-18. I welcome both of these reports and thank the Committee for the work that has gone into them. The Government will consider both reports in full and respond formally in due course.

The 2017 post-attacks review

The five terror attacks in 2017 claimed the lives of 36 people. Many more were injured. Our thoughts remain with the victims and all those affected by the attacks.

I have spoken before of the severe threat posed by terrorism. The police and intelligence community face an unprecedented challenge and have to make difficult prioritisation decisions every day. Since the tragic attack in Westminster, 17 further plots have been disrupted including four extreme right-wing plots.

It is right that we look at what happened so that we have the best chance of preventing further attacks. In 2017, MI5 and the police led internal reviews of the handling of intelligence relating to the Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park attacks to identify enhancements to their operational practices. They also commissioned a broader operational improvements review, which is commended by the ISC in its report. Both reviews were independently overseen by Lord Anderson of Ipswich. A review of the Parsons Green attack has also led to improvements in the implementation of the Channel programme.

There has been significant effort to implement the recommendations of the operational improvement review. Lord Anderson is currently conducting an independent stocktake of the progress that has been made to deliver the recommendations, and will report his findings to the Home Secretary early next year. A public report on his findings will then be laid in the House.

This work is happening alongside Government’s wider efforts to tackle the threat from terrorism. On June 4, we published a strengthened version of the UK’s comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, Contest. This reflects the findings of a fundamental review of all aspects of counter-terrorism, and builds on the lessons learned from last year’s attacks. Through the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill 2017-19, we are ensuring that the police, prosecutors and the judiciary are better equipped with the powers they need to tackle the threat posed by terrorism.

The ISC’s annual report 2017-18

The ISC’s 2017-18 annual report considers in some detail the case for the UK and allied response following the chemical weapons strike on Douma in April. The OPCW interim report on the Douma attack clearly indicated the presence of chlorine at the site and the UN Commission of Inquiry’s most recent report supported the Government’s conclusion that a chemical weapons attack was carried out on Douma on 7 April. The response was a limited, targeted and effective strike to degrade Syrian chemical weapons capability and deter their future use. As I said at the time, it is in our national interest to prevent the further use of chemical weapons in Syria and to uphold and defend the global consensus that these weapons should not be used.

[HCWS1101]

ISC Detainee Reports

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): On 28 June 2018, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) published its detainee mistreatment and rendition reports. Today, the Government are publishing their response.

The Government are grateful for the extensive investigation that the Committee has undertaken into detainee matters and have now considered the conclusions and recommendations set out in its reports.

The Committee found no evidence indicating that UK personnel directly carried out physical mistreatment of detainees. Nor did it find any evidence that any rendition flights transited the UK with a detainee on board. The Committee’s report does state that two detainees are known to have transited through the British overseas territory of Diego Garcia. This fact was originally reported to the House by the then Foreign Secretary in February 2008.

The Committee has said that it was unable to take evidence from some witnesses operating overseas at the time. The Government engaged as fully as possible with the ISC, within the terms of its memorandum of understanding. They spent many thousands of hours reviewing corporate records and disclosed all relevant documents amounting to thousands of pages, and Ministers and senior officials concerned gave many hours of oral evidence. Parliamentary Committees do not ordinarily seek evidence from junior officials and the Government believe they were right in asking only senior officials to speak to the events set out in the documentary record provided to the ISC.

In a specific case, the Committee found evidence suggesting that UK personnel were directly involved in detainee mistreatment administered by others and that this had not been fully investigated. The Ministry of Defence has asked the service police legacy investigations team to consider whether further investigation is required.

In the light of the ISC’s reports, the Government have asked Sir Adrian Fulford, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, to consider how the consolidated guidance could be improved, taking account of the Committee’s views and those of civil society. He has since conducted a public consultation and the Government look forward to receiving his proposals in due course.
The Government continue to give serious consideration to the examination of detainee issues and whether any more lessons can be learned, and, if so, how.

Copies of the response have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses (Cm 9724).

[HCWS1100]

TRANSPORT

Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy: Safety Review Call for Evidence

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): Cycling and walking are increasingly being understood not just as modes of transport but as crucial parts of an integrated approach to issues of health, obesity, air quality, and town and city planning.

In this context, I am today publishing a response to the cycling and walking investment strategy (CWIS): safety review call for evidence (call for evidence).

The CWIS, published in 2017, set out the Government’s ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choice for shorter journeys, or as part of a longer one, by 2040. When the Department for Transport published the call for evidence on 9 March this year, I restated the Government’s commitment to increasing cycling and walking and making the UK’s roads safer for vulnerable users, including cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders.

The call for evidence was very well received, with over 14,000 responses from members of the public of every age and description, as well as local authorities, cycling and walking organisations, police forces and more. People responded with vigour, sending the Department for Transport great ideas, evidence of what works, examples of good practice from other countries, innovative technologies, and imaginative solutions.

More recently on 18 October, the Department published a purely factual document summarising the call for evidence responses and setting out the main themes emerging from our analysis.

We continued to analyse the contributions to the call for evidence, as well as outputs from our regional workshops held in London, Bristol, Birmingham and Manchester. The Government response published today includes a range of safety measures that will bring cycling and walking closer together as part of the Government’s overall ambition to increase active travel. The response also sets out a vision and a two-year plan of action, with 21 packages of measures addressing the key themes and issues raised in the call for evidence.

Among the key measures are:

- A review of guidance in The Highway Code to improve safety for vulnerable road users;
- New investment to support the police to improve enforcement by developing a national back office function to handle footage provided through dash-cam evidence;
- Enforcement against parking in mandatory cycle lanes;
- The appointment of a new cycling and walking champion to raise the profile of active travel;
- Encouragement for local authorities to increase investment in cycling and walking infrastructure to 15% of total transport infrastructure spending;
- Work with key cycling and walking organisations to develop a behaviour change campaign alongside the action plan.

All these measures are designed to support the continued growth of cycling and walking, with all the benefits they bring to our communities, economy, environment and society.

I recognise and value the tremendous amount of activity being undertaken nationally to keep vulnerable road users safe. The Department for Transport wants to provide effective leadership and support to the wide range of partners and other bodies who collectively work together with great commitment to make a real difference to cycling and walking safety. We look forward to continuing our close working with other Government Departments, devolved Administrations, motoring agencies, local councils, police, cycling and walking organisations, motoring groups, road safety campaigners and wider stakeholders to take forward this action plan.

The House may also be aware that we have recently carried out a separate consultation on new cycling offences, which closed on 5 November. It sought views on whether cyclists should face offences similar to those of causing death or serious injury when driving dangerously or carelessly. We are in the process of analysing responses and will publish our response in due course.

[HCWS1099]
Written Statements

Friday 23 November 2018

DEFENCE

Contingent Liability

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has received approval from Her Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) to recognise a revised contingent liability associated with an Apache integrated operational support contract amendment.

The departmental minute describes the revised contingent liability that the MOD will hold as a result of signing a contract amendment to the Apache integrated operational support contract. This amendment extends the support to the Apache helicopter fleet from 2019 until 2024 and covers the third and final pricing period for the contract. Due to the Apache AH-64E coming into service in 2024 and the need to manage obsolescence issues on the current Mk1 helicopter to ensure a smooth transition for pilots and engineers, the out of service date for the Apache Mk1 has been advanced to 2024. This amendment revises the support contract accordingly.

The maximum contingent liability against the MOD for damage at Government premises caused by contractor’s staff is estimated at £18,750,000 and the MOD has an additional exposure value of £2,000,000 for use of the indemnity condition 15, ammunition and explosives.

The contingent liability will remain for the duration of the contract to 2024.

Further contingent liabilities for intellectual property rights (IPR) in software, third party IPR, aircraft flight and taxiing, aviation products, and protection against excessive profit and loss fall within MOD and Defence Equipment & Support delegations.

[HCWS1107]

Service Complaints Ombudsman: Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Ministry of Defence (MOD)’s formal response to the service complaints ombudsman’s (SCO) annual report for 2017 on the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the service complaints system has today been placed in the Library of the House.

The ombudsman’s report commented on the second year of operation of the new service complaints system, which was implemented on 1 January 2016, and the work of her office in 2017. The response sets out MOD’s comments and approach to each of the ombudsman’s new recommendations.

The MOD values the strong independent oversight that the ombudsman brings to the new service complaints process, and remains committed to having a system in which our personnel can have confidence.

[HCWS1105]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Branded Medicines Pricing

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health (Lords) (Lord O’Shaughnessy) has made the following written statement:

I am pleased to inform Parliament that agreement has been reached on a heads of agreement for a new voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access. The voluntary scheme is an agreement between the Department of Health and Social Care, on behalf of the four UK Governments, and the pharmaceutical industry, represented by the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI).

This is an important milestone in the ongoing negotiations. If all proposals in the heads of agreement are agreed in a full scheme document, then the new voluntary scheme will operate for five years starting from 1 January 2019. The current voluntary scheme, the 2014 Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme, will end on 31 December 2018.

The new voluntary scheme is expected to benefit patients, the NHS and the life sciences industry through delivery of its overarching objectives of improving patient access to medicines, innovation and affordability. If final agreement is reached on the proposals set out in the heads of agreement, patients will benefit from faster adoption of clinically and cost-effective medicines so they have access to the best available treatment. The deal is expected to deliver a benefit of £930 million next year, to be reinvested into the NHS. The proposals also demonstrate the Government’s commitment to innovation through measures to improve uptake of transformative new medicines, to support small businesses through improved exemptions from the cost control mechanism and targeted case management of commercial discussions with NHS England, and to provide greater commercial flexibility for companies that offer the best value new medicines. In addition, the new voluntary scheme would deliver better value for the NHS by ensuring the branded medicines spend remains within affordable limits through an overall cap on growth on NHS branded medicines sales.

Taken together, the new voluntary scheme is expected to support the Government’s commitment to ensuring the UK remains an attractive hub for our world-leading life sciences sector, a central part of the Government’s industrial strategy.

A summary of the heads of agreement has been placed in the Library. Further information will be provided as the negotiations progress.

[HCWS1108]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government: Government Equalities Office

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms that the Government Equalities Office (GEO) will transfer to the Cabinet Office from 1 April 2019.
This machinery of government change will provide a permanent home for the GEO, in line with a key recommendation from the Women and Equalities Select Committee in its report earlier this year.

The Government and the DVSA will continue their commitment to keep Britain’s roads amongst the safest in the world by enforcing legislation, as well as working with industry to provide guidance on vehicle and driver safety.

[HCWS1106]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Benefit and Pension Uprating

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): I am pleased to announce the proposed social security benefit and pension rates for 2019-20. I have attached the table of rates to this statement and I will place a copy of the proposed benefit and pension rates 2019-20 in the Library of the House. The annual uprating of benefits will take place for state pensions and most other benefits in the first full week of the tax year. In 2019, this will be the week beginning 8 April. A corresponding provision will be made in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Government will lay its own statutory instruments to make these increases to carer’s allowance in Scotland.

The annual uprating process takes into account a variety of measures:

The basic and new state pension will be increased by the Government’s “triple lock” commitment, meaning that they will be uprated in line with the highest of prices (CPI), earnings or 2.5%. Consequently, they will be uprated by 2.6% (the May-July average weekly earnings figure).

The legislative requirement for the pension credit standard minimum guarantee is that it is increased at least in line with earnings. This year the pension credit standard minimum guarantee will increase by £4.25 a week for a single person (and £6.45 for a couple). The pension credit savings credit maximum amount will be increased in line with prices. Benefits linked to the additional costs of disability, and for carers, are increased by the annual rise in prices (2.4%). A number of other elements—including non-dependant deductions—will also be uprated in line with prices.

The majority of working-age benefits have been frozen at their 2015-16 levels for four years under the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.

In line with the announcement in the autumn Budget, universal credit work allowances will be increased by £1,000 from April 2019. This increase will take effect after the rates are increased by prices.

The list of proposed benefit and pension rates also includes a change to the carer’s allowance earnings rule, which will be increased for 2019-20 from £120 to £123 a week.

The attachment can be viewed online at http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-11-23/HCWS1104/.

[HCWS1104]
Petition

Wednesday 21 November 2018

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Petition of Giovanni Di Stefano

The petition of Giovanni Di Stefano,

Declares that the petitioner is currently imprisoned at HMP Highpoint, Stradishall, Suffolk CB8 9YG and is a national of the Republic of Italy, born on the 1 July 1955; the petitioner is serving a sentence of 14 years imprisonment from 28 March 2013 and such sentence ends on the 27 March 2020 or under the early release scheme on the 27 June 2019; the petitioner is however, also subject to a 3 year default sentence for a confiscation order imposed on the 22 April 2014; however, that order and default was solely on the basis of “hidden assets”; further the House of Commons will be alarmed to know that under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and all its subsequent amendments in the past 16 years the House of Commons never added “hidden assets” as a finding; further, the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 remains wholly silent on such a term or finding; the term and imposition of imprisonment for “hidden assets” was created by the Judiciary who are not elected law making members of parliament; the term commenced in 2006 and no political challenge has ever been taken; Parliament has no legislative superior; further that the courts have no inherent powers to invalidate, strike down, supersede, disregard, add or amend the provisions of any statute duly enacted by the Queen in Parliament, and indeed extremely limited power to even enquire whether a statute has been duly enacted; the judiciary in adding/amending the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 by adding “hidden assets” have usurped the functions of Parliament and thousands of citizens are suffering imprisonment as a direct result.

The petitioners thus requests that the House of Commons urges first and foremost that the Secretary of State for Justice orders the immediate release of anyone currently imprisoned as a result of a finding of “hidden assets” and that any defendant in confiscation proceedings are not subject to future arbitrary and unlawful detention founded upon the Judiciary creating a law without the sanction of Parliament.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Roger Gale.]
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 12 November 2018

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Badger Cull

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the Badger Cull on 6 November 2018.

George Eustice: On costs, again we publish the figures every year. The 2018 costs will be published shortly, but those for previous years have already been published. Last year, the total cost of the cull was about £4 million, which covers policing, licensing and all the monitoring work done by Natural England.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food:

An error has been identified in the speech I gave during the debate on the Badger Cull.

The correct statement should have been:

George Eustice: On costs, again we publish the figures every year. The 2018 costs will be published shortly, but those for previous years have already been published. Last year, the total cost of the cull was about £4 million, which covers policing, and a further £2.6 million, which includes licensing and all the monitoring work done by Natural England.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Sexual Violence in Conflict

The following is an extract from Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs questions on 30 October 2018.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Given that the recent UN taskforce report highlighted appalling examples of sexual violence against Rohingya Muslims in Burma, I welcome the announcement that the Secretary of State made on his recent visit to Rakhine of increased support to victims of this terrible crime, but what can be done to increase the resources available to other conflict regions?

Harrriet Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the announcement and highlighting the work of that team of experts, who have now been deployed on a wide range of cases. The Ministry of Defence has helped to train 17,000 people on this issue, and the team of experts provided training to make sure that evidence is secured and has worked extensively on this important issue in a range of situations around the world.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Africa:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson).

The correct response should have been:

Harrriet Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming the announcement and highlighting the work of that team of experts, who have now been deployed on a wide range of cases.

The Ministry of Defence has helped to train 17,000 people on this issue, and the team of experts has provided training to make sure that evidence is secured and has worked extensively on this important issue in a range of situations around the world.

TREASURY

EU Customs Union and Draft Withdrawal Agreement: Cost

The following is an extract from proceedings on an urgent question on EU Customs Union and Draft Withdrawal Agreement: Cost on 22 October 2018.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Minister has been asked five times to identify the figures for unemployment if we leave the customs union, so let us make it easier for him: will unemployment go up or will it go down?

John Glen: What I can say is that unemployment in this country is at a record low, demonstrating the coherence of this Government’s economic policy.


Letter of correction from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray).

The correct response should have been:

John Glen: What I can say is that the unemployment rate in this country is the lowest since 1975, demonstrating the coherence of this Government’s economic policy.

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Ministerial Correction

Thursday 15 November 2018

EDUCATION

Plymouth Challenge for Schools

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on the Plymouth Challenge for Schools on 6 November 2018.

Nick Gibb: As the hon. Gentleman will know, outcomes at secondary level are mixed. In 2018, 40.4% of students in Plymouth entered the English baccalaureate, which is a core group of academic GCSEs—English, maths, at least two sciences, a language and a humanity. That figure outstrips the national average of 35.1% and is 1.5 percentage points higher than the figure for Plymouth in 2014.


Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards:

An error has been identified in the speech I gave during the debate on the Plymouth Challenge for Schools. The correct statement should have been:

Nick Gibb: As the hon. Gentleman will know, outcomes at secondary level are mixed. In 2018, 40.4% of students in Plymouth entered the English baccalaureate, which is a core group of academic GCSEs—English, maths, at least two sciences, a language and a humanity. That figure outstrips the national average of 38.5% and is 1.5 percentage points higher than the figure for Plymouth in 2014.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 19 November 2018

EDUCATION

The following is an extract from Education questions on 12 November 2018.

Apprenticeships

2. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships. [907537]

11. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships. [907547]

22. Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the quality of apprenticeships. [907559]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): Apprenticeships are now of high quality, with more off-the-job training and holistic end-point assessment. This ensures that, at the completion of an apprenticeship, the apprentice can demonstrate that they have the skills, knowledge and behaviours for their existing employer or a new employer in the future. Forty-four apprenticeships are now at the new higher-quality standard, and training is up from 540 hours to 670 hours, which is a 20% increase—well ahead of where we thought we would be on quality.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green).

The correct response should have been:

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): Apprenticeships are now of high quality, with more off-the-job training and holistic end-point assessment. This ensures that, at the completion of an apprenticeship, the apprentice can demonstrate that they have the skills, knowledge and behaviours for their existing employer or a new employer in the future.

Forty-four per cent. of apprenticeship starts are on the new higher-quality standards, and training is up from 540 hours to 670 hours, which is a 20% increase—well ahead of where we thought we would be on quality.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 20 November 2018

CABINET OFFICE
Infected Blood Inquiry

The following is an extract from Questions to the Cabinet Office on Wednesday 14 November 2018.

Jeff Smith: Last month, the chair of the inquiry, Sir Brian Langstaff, said that many victims of the infected blood scandal are still living on the breadline today. The inquiry is not due to look at financial support until 2020, so what more now can the Government do to help the people affected?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, different compensation packages have been agreed by the Department of Health and Social Care in the different parts of the United Kingdom. Sir Brian did ask the Government to look at the case for some additional measures, which are being considered by the Secretary of State for Health and his ministerial team, and the Minister responsible for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is very willing to talk to the inquiry team about that.


Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, different financial support packages have been agreed by the Department of Health and Social Care in the different parts of the United Kingdom. Sir Brian did ask the Government to look at the case for some additional measures, which are being considered by the Secretary of State for Health and his ministerial team, and the Minister responsible for mental health, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is very willing to talk to the inquiry team about that.

The following is a further extract from Questions to the Cabinet Office on Wednesday 14 November 2018.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I suggest to the Minister that one measure that he could take quite quickly is to level up all the payments that those who are infected and affected receive? There is a variation around the United Kingdom at the moment because of devolution, and such a move would go a long way to show good faith to this community.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has always been the most ardent champion of those who have been affected by this scandal, but it is the legal and constitutional position that each part of the United Kingdom is responsible for its own compensation scheme, which reflects the devolution settlement as regards health policy.


Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson).

The correct response should have been:

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady has always been the most ardent champion of those who have been affected by this scandal, but it is the legal and constitutional position that each part of the United Kingdom is responsible for its own financial support scheme, which reflects the devolution settlement as regards health policy.